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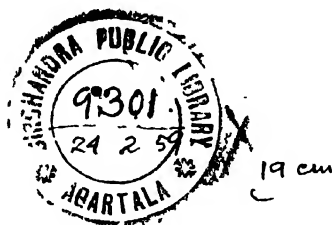
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MAURICE DEKOBRA

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*The Widow's Might*

Translated by Sheila O'Callaghan from the French  
*Les Lotus Dorment la Nuit*



W. H. ALLEN  
LONDON

1907

*Made and printed in Great Britain  
by John Gardner (Printers) Ltd., Hawthorne Road, Liverpool, 20,  
for the publishers W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd., Essex Street, London, W.C.2.*

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*Part One*

CHAPTER I

*Miss Monroe Makes a Bet*

MALOUK'S white Chrysler abruptly cleft a passage through the teeming streets of Calcutta. The dense mass of humanity seen through its windows, right and left, presented a motley scene. There were Bengalis in *dhotis*, turbaned Hindus, ascetic-faced Jainists, lounge-suited Europeans and, threading in and out between them all, were screaming, ragged urchins, darting and swarming exactly like the flies round the trays of sugary sweets and over-ripe fruit hawked by the pedlars.

Soon the car drew up outside the airport building and its uniformed Bengali chauffeur sprang out smartly to open the door. Malouk with difficulty heaved his vast bulk up from the luxuriously-cushioned interior. As he got out he told the man:

"Take the car round to the parking place and re-fill with petrol. As soon as I come out with the lady, get her luggage and put it in the back. Then we start at once for Chandernagor. Understood?"

"Yes, sahib."

Terrified of being late, Malouk hurried to the airport entrance, mopping his brow, for the heat was intense. Inside he sensed that something was wrong. The place

seemed to him extraordinarily quiet considering that the plane was due in at 5.10 and it was then 5.15 p.m. Surely, he reasoned, all the passengers couldn't have gone already; it was more likely to be a case of unexpected delay. Looking round the deserted main hall, he noticed the Air France office and went over to make enquiries.

He was told that the Constellation, due in from Orly Airport, had arrived ten minutes ahead of time.

"What? How's that?" exclaimed Malouk, hardly believing his ears.

"The ten minutes were gained as the result of a stiff following wind in the valley of the Ganges. The aircraft practically doubled her speed over that part of the trip."

"Are all the passengers gone, then?"

"Yes, sir. There were only eighteen."

Malouk hesitated a moment, struggling with the keen disappointment that was plainly to be read in his fat, greasy face, then asked the clerk whether the passengers from France included a Madame Vigneul from Paris.

The clerk flipped over the pages of the passenger list, then read out, " 'Madame Anna Vigneul, 112, rue Raynouard, Paris.' That the lady, sir? She was on board."

"And she's already left the airport?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. All the Air France passengers have gone."

Malouk thanked the man and went out. He was exasperated by his bad luck and the tornado that had deprived him of the opportunity of meeting the beautiful Parisienne. He had wanted to place his car at her

disposal and drive her out to her sister and brother-in-law, the Pelissiers, with whom she would be staying.

Back in his car, he told the chauffeur to drive him to the Great Eastern Hotel, Old Court Hill Street, where he always booked a room when he stayed in Calcutta. He had an appointment there with his Bengali lawyer, Koumar Chatterji, and found him already installed in the bar with a glass of orange juice, in keeping with the abstemious habits of one belonging to the orthodox Hindu religion. The lawyer had been careful to choose an out-of-the-way corner of the bar where he and his client could talk without being disturbed.

The pair of them made a strange contrast: Malouk the opulent business tycoon in superbly cut suit of *bois de rose* tussore silk; Chatterji, lean and Gandhi-like in nothing but a white *dhoti* fastened between the legs. The lawyer's hooked nose and close black thatch gave him the appearance of a vulture. His disconcerting habit of fixing an interlocutor with a pair of sharp black beady eyes intensified the resemblance to a bird of prey. He spoke English to Malouk and supplemented his words with long sweeping gestures of his claw-like hands.

Malouk was eager to get down to business at once. Crafty and hard over money matters, he had the millionaire's insatiable appetite and instinct to be in on a good deal. For him a rupee was a rupee, and always would be.

"Well, Mr. Chatterji," he began, "I hope you've been successful?"

The lawyer stretched his thin lips in a smile of self-satisfaction, emitting a *tsch-tsch* sound as he did so.

"My dear Mr. Malouk," he replied, "my task has been all the easier since the financial affairs of your Mr. Pelissier are not such as to inspire confidence any longer."

"In that case you've got the bills?"

"Between ourselves, the people I approached were delighted with my proposition. The director of the Orion Transport Company, Mr. Bhandekar, the head of Eastern Motors and Mr. Lal Gupta of Clive Street, all received me with open arms. No bank was willing to cash the bills falling due at the end of November that Mr. Pelissier gave them. Just imagine their amazement when I told them you were willing to take the bills for 80 per cent. of their value. They were so very uneasy about payment of any kind, they just jumped at the offer!"

"Splendid. Go on. . ."

"I've recovered the three bills to the tune of 240,000 rupees. You'll find them in your dossier."

"Excellent! Excellent! And the rest—What I'm most concerned about is the mortgage, the Kalwar mortgage."

"The mortgage taken out by Pelissier on his tea gardens at Sylhet is not quite so easy. The holder, Mr. Rajaram Saksena, although Pelissier has failed to pay the interest due six months ago, hesitated up to now to start legal proceedings and to negotiate a transfer. However, the information I gave him about the state of the crop following the cyclone at the end of last June made up his mind for him. When the legal formalities are completed in about three weeks' time, you, Mr. Malouk, will be the holder of the mortgage worth 250,000. In a month's time Pelissier will owe 12 per

cent. past interest, plus the 12 per cent. which falls due at the end of November."

The glum scowl which had settled on Malouk's face since his disappointment at the airport had been relaxing little by little as he listened to his lawyer's news. At last he could no longer hide his pleasure and fairly beamed as he said: "It gets better and better! Mr. Chatterji, you have been a wonderful negotiator!"

To which his astute lawyer replied:

"Since you wished to gather in all Mr. Pelissier's debts, I should say you now hold all the trump cards, and you've got that young man—like this! . . ."

The long skinny fingers of the Bengali lawyer closed tightly round an imaginary neck, and Malouk burst out laughing, adding a mime of his own which looked like breaking the back of some little animal across his knee.

"Yes, I'll break him like this, just when I want to, in my own good time. I can choose my time carefully, for don't forget, Mr. Chatterji, he has other personal debts with me, too. I certainly have him where I want him! So far he suspects nothing, or, at least, he doesn't realize to what extent he is in my power. He's 'had it', as they say in England! . . ."

Chatterji thought the whole thing highly diverting and started clacking his tongue again like a good humoured duck. However, he permitted himself a discreet observation.

"Mr. Malouk, what you do is your own affair and I do not propose offering advice to a man of your wide experience; but as your lawyer sincerely interested in your welfare I am naturally surprised to find you laying out considerable sums of money to cover the debts of a

man who has speculated somewhat wildly and who can be completely ruined by the end of the year."

"In the ordinary course of events, Mr. Chatterji, I should never have permitted myself the luxury of throwing tens of thousands of rupees to the winds merely for the pleasure of becoming Pelissier's sole creditor. In so doing, it happens that I have reasons which have nothing to do with normal business transactions."

"Well, as far as I can see you're risking the loss of some 300,000 rupees. The pending liquidation of your debtor will be a sizeable financial disaster, you know."

"Pooh! What does it matter? I might have lost the money at cards or backing horses! . . ."

Chatterji tactfully said no more, but gathered up his papers and put them in his briefcase. Malouk tried to detain him and asked him to dine with him.

"Thank you, but I can't. There's a meeting of the Bengal Bar to-night at the Town Hall, and I have to be there."

So the two parted, and Malouk went up to his room for a short nap before dinner. At seven o'clock he got up and went out to Firpo's restaurant in Chowringhi Street. Firpo's was considered a smart place, patronised by the best people in town, and Malouk could count on meeting someone he knew there to pass away a pleasant hour before going back to Chandernagor. Sure enough, hardly had he set foot inside the door than he was hailed in English by a familiar voice from the direction of the bar.

"Hello, Malouk, you old devil! Come here and have a Martini! . . ."

The speaker was Gary Watson, an American who had been knocking about the Far East for the last twenty years, and had abandoned Shanghai only since the regime of Mao Tse Tung had made the climate there unhealthy for Western capitalists. Gary was no oil painting, being thick-set, tough and leathery; but he had an engaging college-kid smile that momentarily illuminated and transformed his alcoholic features. He ran an import-export firm near the Bank of India building in Calcutta, and had got friendly with Malouk through occasional business transactions with him.

By his side in the bar was a good looking young woman from Texas, "doing" that part of India as a tourist. Gary introduced his companion: "Mr. Malouk—Miss Betty Monroe."

He omitted the interesting biographical information about Betty, a former film starlet, that she had been married and divorced three times to and from oil magnates of Dallas and Houston; and that she had done very well for herself, so well that she was now *en voyage* in the Far East for her private pleasure out of her accumulated matrimonial profits.

Half an hour later the three of them, Gary, Betty and Malouk were dining together in convivial mood to the strains of hot Philippine jazz and the latest hit numbers from Broadway. Malouk, who had often gone on the tiles with Gary, grew confidential, and just as the waiter served Betty's pineapple ice, he unburdened himself of the sore subject that was most uppermost in his mind.

"Gary," he began, "behold in front of you a man who as recently as five o'clock has experienced a most bitter disappointment!"



"What kind? Sentimental?" chipped in Betty.

"Of course, sentimental. . . I was looking forward so much to meeting a beautiful French woman from Paris at the airport, and I had the bad luck to miss her by ten minutes—the plane arrived ten minutes ahead of time."

"Who is she?" questioned Gary, interested as always in the amorous adventures of his friend.

"A woman whom I have never seen," said Malouk blandly.

Betty was intrigued by this avowal. "If you've never seen her, then how do you know she's beautiful?" she shot at him quickly.

"She's Madame Pelissier's sister," continued Malouk, addressing Gary. "The Pelissiers are French; they live at Chandernagor and I've known them through business matters for quite a long time. Giselle Pelissier has a sister, Anna, who lives in Paris. Having lost her husband a few months ago, she decided to come out to India to see her sister. Well, not long ago I happened to see a large photograph of this Anna—Madame Vigneul—at the Pelissiers', and—laugh your heads off, call me the complete idiot—but I am head over heels in love with that picture! I tell you, my dear Gary, this woman is superb! Wonderful figure, extremely attractive, eyes—terrific! She's got everything! She's got the seductive quality that can lead a man to the devil! Beside her most of Hollywood's glamour girls aren't worth a glance."

"You certainly seem to have fallen in a big way for this charmer you've never met!" observed Gary.

"What about you, Gary? Do you mean to say you've never been smitten with a photograph?"

"Yes. . . when I was in the army. I used to rave over the pin-ups I stuck up on the wall above my bed; but then I was young. That sort of thing doesn't usually afflict a man of your age, Malouk!"

"Age has nothing to do with it. One can make a fool of oneself at any age," quickly corrected Malouk, a little on the defensive. "Besides, who are you to talk? Here you are living in Calcutta with your pick of high-born Bengali dames, of seductive lady tourists, like your charming companion here. . . You know perfectly well that there are plenty of presentable Western women floating around this city who are not averse to a spot of romance on the banks of the Ganges. I, on the other hand, am condemned to celibacy back in the jungle. What chances have I for a normal sex life on my estates in the wilds of Pakistan or the Burma border? The home products hardly interest me; the few Europeans are usually married, and any kind of relationship with them is either impossible or positively dangerous on account of their husbands' jealousy.

"So, when a fellow who has denied himself for a long time—you'll excuse my plain speaking, Miss Monroe!—suddenly finds an enticing dish in the neighbourhood, what is more natural than that he should lick his lips with anticipation? . . ."

Betty Monroe, who had been listening and thoughtfully sipping her champagne, suddenly exclaimed: "Well! I know I could never fall in love with a man from his photograph!"

"That's because your attitude to a man is much the same as to a new car—you like to have a preliminary try-out,"

"Precisely. . . Also, it must be remembered that a man's attractiveness does not depend on the shape of his nose so much as on the thickness of his wallet. As far as you're concerned, Mr. Malouk, I don't want to be a wet blanket, but what gives you the idea that everything's going to go the way you want with this woman you've taken a fancy to without knowing?"

"Well, to start with, she's a widow. . ."

"That's certainly an important point"; remarked Gary.

"And she's unattached."

"How do you know?"

"Well, if she already had any serious attachment she'd hardly have planned a long absence from the object of her affections in order to visit her married sister here, would she?"

"That's true; but how do you know you're going to be to her taste?"

"I don't! Don Juan was undoubtedly a better set-up fellow than I; but I have noticed that remarkably few women are insensitive to certain lines of persuasion. . ."

"Such as?"

"Oh, presents, you know. . ."

"H'm, of course," agreed Betty, with irony that was lost on Malouk, "a bunch of violets can work miracles!"

"Yes," said Malouk, modestly.

Gary leaned over and, tapping his girl friend on the arm, remarked: "Our poor friend is suffering from delusions!"

"Far from it," retorted Malouk. "The bouquet I'm talking about is made in the form of a clip. The violets are

amethysts with four carat diamond dew drops in each."

"Ah! That's *quite* a different matter," quickly interposed Miss Monroe, now all respectful attention. "You've certainly got something there."

"Would you say you have come across many women who are proof against a suitor armed with diamonds, rubies and emeralds?"

"No, I don't know any," admitted the down-to-earth Miss Monroe with engaging frankness.

"That's precisely what I've been turning over in my mind ever since I first laid eyes on the photograph of the beautiful Madame Vigneul. What on earth do you suppose is the good of all the money I make, if not, when the opportunity presents itself, to procure myself some of life's more delectable pleasures?"

"Good old Malouk!" cried Gary, "That's the spirit!"

"Oh, I've thought of everything!" Malouk assured them smugly. "Suppose, for instance, that the lady proves obstinate and difficult, do you know what I'll do?"

"No, what?"

"I'll invite her to a tiger hunt and organise things so that I appear to save her from attack by the ferocious beast. Under the stress of the moment and gratitude to me for saving her life she'll just fall into my arms like a little bird caught in a cage."

This display of childish naïveté on the part of a cunning old lecher left the American woman speechless. She watched Malouk for a moment in silence, then, as he lit her cigarette for her, Miss Monroe politely remarked: "You will keep us informed about the success of your plans, won't you?"

Addressing her escort, she added: "Gary, darling, let's lay a bet on your friend's luck."

"Sure! Which way will you have it? A win, or a place?" joked Gary.

"Neither, silly! A bed, of course!"

## CHAPTER II

### *The Nawab of Chandernagor*

DOCTOR Ruffec's bungalow was on the north side of the town of Chandernagor, not far from his clinic. He came home as usual towards half past six that evening in the red Hillman that was a familiar sight in the neighbourhood, and, as usual, there on the verandah waiting for him was his wife Linette, plump, blonde, blue-eyed, pleasant-faced and thirty-five, a Rubens goddess quite out of place among the leaner female deities of those parts.

Linette's first words to her husband were:

"Has she arrived?"

She was talking, of course, about Madame Vigneul, otherwise known in the local European colony as "the Parisienne", and the "beautiful Anna, sister of Giselle Pclissier."

The advent of a stranger, much less so interesting a stranger, in this far-off, formerly French scrap of Ganges delta, was so rare an occurrence that it had set all tongues wagging. Everyone knew that La Vigneul was a young widow of great beauty, charm and elegance and speculation ran high on the subject of the havoc to be wrought among the susceptible, highly inflammable material of the colony.

"Not yet," said Ruffec in answer to his wife's question. "I called in at the Pelissier's on my way home. André's off to Calcutta by car to fetch Madame, who is likely to be a little late. Giselle doesn't expect them before eight."

The Ruffec's cook appeared and served them with freshly pressed lemon squash. The doctor wiped his perspiring forehead as he lay in a wicker chaise-longue and pushed a cigarette across the little table that separated him from his wife.

As she took it Linette remarked: "The Saunders telephoned an hour ago. Mrs. Ramnath—you know, the wife of the director of the Marco Polo Institute—asked in her usual sugary voice if the lady from Paris had arrived yet. Mrs. Bannerji wanted to know, too. You'd think we were expecting the arrival of a royal princess at least, with suitable pomp and splendour!"

The doctor made an indulgent grimace and said "Oh, all these women are just eaten up with curiosity!"

"Well, after all, George, it's understandable, isn't it? I'm eager also to see the widowed sister Giselle has hardly said a word about. I never knew she had a close relation in Paris."

"If she doesn't talk much about her, that simply means the two sisters have little in common; life has separated them. Giselle has been here in India for the past eight years without once going back to France, where, I imagine, Madame Vigneul would still be had she not lost her husband."

Linette dropped her voice, as if to prevent her servants, from over-hearing (although they did not understand) and said: "Frankly, George, I smell a skeleton in their cupboard in the past."



"Bah! You and your imagination! What next!"

"Well, how do you explain two sisters being such strangers to each other?"

"It could be the result of taking sides in the sort of family feud that divides blood relations so often. . ."

"Yes", said Linette dubiously, "unless, of course, the death of Monsieur Vigneul throws light on a few things. . ."

"Let's see, what was he, now? I can't remember," asked the doctor.

"He ran a currency exchange bureau in Paris. He was much older than his wife. She is thirty-five and he would have been about seventy. He had been ill for ages."

"Well, there you are—there's your explanation of Madame Vigneul's trip to India. An old man of Vigneul's age and state of health wouldn't want to travel. Only after his death is his devoted wife free to stretch her wings towards the wonders of the East. . ."

"All the same Giselle was literally knocked sideways when she received the news of her sister's proposed visit. I can see her incomprehension now as she turned up here a fortnight ago with the telegram in her hand announcing sister Anna's intention to come and spend some months with her."

The doctor refrained from further comment and went off to take the splash-shower that a servant had discreetly hinted was ready for him. Linette sat on in her rocking-chair, fanning herself and thinking. She was herself a woman with a 'past'. She knew what it was to lead a life of adventure and insecurity as a night-club and radio singer of hot numbers not always in the best of taste; she knew what it was to submit to the atten-



tions of unwelcome admirers, always in the hope of getting on in her career. It was a life of bitter disillusion. She first met Dr. Ruffec at Dakar, not long before the outbreak of war in 1909. She had been engaged to sing in a bar there, then found herself abandoned by a coloured impressario.

The young French doctor had appeared on the scene and proposed marriage just at the moment when Linette was at her wit's end, penniless in Africa. She gladly exchanged her dreams of fame for a more stable existence, and she soon learned to love and respect the sun-tanned, warm-hearted, and generous George Ruffec, for whom the practice of medicine was a sacred mission. The doctor's next appointment, after their marriage, had brought them to India.

The ringing of the telephone brought Linette back from her reverie of the past to the present, and as she lifted the receiver she found herself idly wondering whether Madame Vigneul would be as lovely as her photographs made her out to be.

It was Giselle's voice she heard coming over the line. After the exchange of "Hello's", Giselle said:

"She's arrived! The chauffeur's carrying in her luggage—five trunks and six suitcases! Not half enough, I should say!"

"Ah! So, she means to dazzle us all with the latest Dior creations!," commented Linette lightly, then added more seriously: "You must be feeling very happy, Giselle, dear, at rediscovering a big sister again after all these years!"

There was a blank moment of silence before Giselle's voice came over the line saying: "Yes, yes, of course. . . It's eight years since we saw each other. . ."

"And your sister—how does she feel about it?"

"Oh, Anna seems delighted to be in India."

"And, with you, I hope. . ."

"Of course. At this moment André's showing her the view over the Hoogli from the end of the garden before the daylight goes. I'm taking advantage of their absence to ring you up. Don't forget, Linette, we're throwing a party to-morrow night in honour of Anna's arrival. There'll be about fifty people in all. Do bring George over early, before nine, so that we can have a good gossip before the rest turn up."

"I will, Giselle. Thanks a lot. George is washing and changing at this moment. . . maybe you can hear him warbling in the bath! See you to-morrow, then. Good-bye."

Next morning, having left his manager to unravel the reports of his overseers in his Sylhet tea estate, André Pelissier sauntered out of his office to call on the near-by Lloyd's Bank agent. As he was passing the church—built by Italian missionaries in 1786—a certain well-known white Chrysler car loomed into view and pulled up with a squeal of brakes.

Malouk hailed André with unwonted eagerness. Only his increasing financial obligation to the gross old bore over the past two years enabled André to overcome the instinctive dislike he felt for him. When he asked this repulsive Croesus home to dinner, as he often did out of policy, André even urged tolerance on his wife, although she loathed the familiarity and furtive pawing she invariably got from their influential guest.

Now, leaning out of his car fanning his bald head with a khaki sun-helmet, Malouk called to André.

"I hear, my friend, that we have a new lady resident

in our midst. Everyone is talking about her. . .”

“Yes, indeed. That’s my sister-in-law. She arrived last night.”

With his usual craft, Malouk added a realistic comedy touch, asking: “How did she come? By boat, train or air?”

“Air France,” replied André. “I went to pick her up at the airport at Calcutta.”

“Does she feel strange in her unaccustomed surroundings?”

“No, not a bit. She’s already done some sight-seeing—Bombay, Taj-Mahal, Ellora caves, Udaipur—to get the hang of things.”

“And, no doubt, bought herself saris in every colour of the rainbow?”

“That’s practically certain! I hope you received an invitation from my wife to the party to-night?”

“Yes, I have. Please thank her for me. I’m looking forward to paying my respects to the ambassadress of French fashion and beauty!”

“You will be most welcome, my good friend.”

Malouk quickly dropped his urbanity and brought Pelissier back to the harsh realities of life.

“By the way,” he said in a changed voice, “are you satisfied with the way things are going? Prices on the stock exchange in Calcutta are rising.”

André nodded and said: “Only for some holdings; not generally.”

“You are aware that we shall soon have a certain matter to settle, you and I?”

“Yes, I know! I know!”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter in the least. I just thought I’d remind you, as it came into my head. . .”

"You needn't worry. I'll manage somehow. . ."

"I have every confidence that you will. Let us forget these sordid money matters, for to-night we all rejoice in welcoming your beautiful sister-in-law. Really, Pelissier, the gods have a soft spot for you! Just imagine—you already have a charming young wife in dear Giselle who is the admiration of all, and now you're going to have another extremely attractive female under your roof. You've got a monopoly, my friend! You're going to be an object of envy, I can tell you! Nawab of two 'pin-ups', you lucky dog! Convey my respects to them both. Till to-night, then! Au revoir!"

With that, feeling himself to be the very soul of wit and gaiety, Malouk told his chauffeur to drive on, and André stood distastefully watching the vehicle disappear in a cloud of dust.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Beauty from Frânée*

THE Pelissiers' numerous domestic staff included, as is customary in India, a cook or *bawachi*, a groom—*syce*, a night-watchman—*chokadar*, an errand runner—*chaprassi*, a laundry boy—*dhobi*, a house boy—*mehtur* and several gardeners—*malis*. Madame Pelissier's favourite domestic, however, was a pretty little fourteen-year-old Hindu girl who acted as her personal maid. The girl was named Lakshmi and came from Pondicherry.

Orphaned at an early age, the child had been brought up in the family of a French-speaking Senegalese infantry commander in Indo-China. Not wishing to accompany this family to Africa, she had been repatriated to Pondicherry at the age of eleven and, as luck would have it, was "discovered" shortly afterwards by Madame Pelissier and brought to Chander-nagor. The girl took an instant liking to her employer, and as time went on her devotion to her *memsahib* became almost fanatical. Under Giselle's guidance her maid became an accomplished needlewoman and personal attendant.

Now, at fourteen, she was also blossoming into a very presentable young woman, with a skin the colour of burnt topaz, hair like polished ebony, a perfect figure,

regular features and great laughing black eyes. Her intelligence was easily keeping pace with her physical beauty.

The morning after Madame Vigneul's arrival, this girl came as usual to her mistress's room to draw back the mosquito net and help with the *memsahib's* toilet. The first thing Giselle said to her was to ask whether she had been to Madame Vigneul's room to see if there was anything Lakshmi could do for her.

Lakshmi at once piped up in her sing-song childish voice.

"Oh, yes, Memsahib! . . . The madam from France, what beautiful silk dresses she have—soft as the feathers of little birds! And, please, Memsahib, tell me, do all the pretty ladies of Paris put red paint on their finger nails, like Madame Vigneul?"

"They do, Lakshmi—it's the fashion."

"Then why you no do it also, Memsahib?"

"Oh, because here in the jungle I've given up that sort of thing. . ."

"You are very pretty all the same, Memsahib—even without red paint on your nails!"

"Nonsense, Lakshmi! . . ."

"Yes, yes, Memsahib is always the prettiest bird among all the other pretty birds!"

Concealing her amusement with difficulty, Giselle said in as severe a tone as she could muster, "Lakshmi, how many times have I told you *not* to call ladies 'birds'? It's vulgar! You must drop the habit."

"Oh, Memsahib, I'm sorry. I learn it from Balamba at Commander Maillet's. He always call pretty ladies in beautiful clothes 'birds' ". I won't say it any more!

I only say what you like. When I was little at Pondicherry there was an old tramp begging through the village. He had long hair and an awful lot of gree-grees round his neck, but no clothes. He used to say to me 'Lakshmi, get down on your knees in front of Bramah and say your prayers!' But Memsahib, you're the one I'd like to kneel before and pray to!"

"You like me a lot, then, Lakshmi?"

"You saved my life, Memsahib, when I had the fever, and all the wise old people in the village were saying 'Lakshmi will die to-morrow'. I didn't die—because of you!"

With that Lakshmi went out of the room to fetch her mistress a glass of fresh lemon juice which she put down on the bedside table; then she started prattling on again.

"Memsahib expects many, many people to-night to honour the Madame from Paris?"

"About fifty, Lakshmi."

"Your sister, Memsahib, also is pretty. . ."

"Ah! You think so?"

"Yes—but she is older than you."

"She's thirty-five."

"Thirty-five! What a lot of years! But, all the same to-night there will be plenty sahibs who make flirting with her."

"That is possible. . ."

"Mukandi told me Madame Vigneul comes here because her husband in France is dead. That means then that she can't be burned like the widows of Hindustan, she has come to weep for her husband with you, Memsahib."

"That's about it, Lakshmi. In France instead of

jumping on top of the funeral pyre, widows console themselves by looking for another husband."

Lakshmi nodded, thinking to herself that those European widows' conduct was not very flattering to their former husbands. Giselle interrupted her reflections by telling her to run along to see whether Madame Vigneul needed her.

"Ask her if she has any dresses she wants pressed. Tell her you'll help her with her hair, if she wishes."

"Yes, Memsahib," said Lakshmi, but, hesitated, looking puzzled, then added, "But, Memsahib, I no understand how she do hair. She have almost no hair on her head!"

Giselle explained that her sister's short crop was the very latest fashion in Paris and Europe.

"Oh, well, then if all the memsahibs over there have their hair cut off," observed Lakshmi sagely, "the sahibs should wear long hair in plaits, as the Sikhs do here."

That evening the Pelissiers' bungalow was ablaze with light for the party, and the verandah outside was festooned with Venetian lanterns. Great baskets of hibiscus lent a festive air to the drawing room. Even the man who worked the punka was dressed in the equivalent of Sunday-best surmounted by a gorgeous blue turban.

André, making a last minute inspection of the food and drinks, looked a splendid figure of a man in his suit of tropical white. He was tall, athletic and as blond as a Viking despite his forty years and the ups and downs of a speculative career spent entirely in Asia, first in rice in the delta area and then in Yunnan; next



in rubber, which proved so disastrous he was glad to cut his losses and get out to make a fresh start trading with the Chinese around Shanghai.

He had married Giselle on one of his trips back to France and taken her out to India on their honeymoon, because by that time he had gone into tea planting in Bengal after a spell in Ceylon learning the business. At first he did well in tea, and with a Bengali partner he invested in a half-share of some gardens in the Sylhet district which seemed to offer big prizes to the astute cultivator. For the past two years, however, things had not been going too well. One of his creditors above all others was getting troublesome. That one was Malouk.

Had André not been an incorrigible optimist he might have been worried; but he had survived some hard knocks in his time and when he was right down he was always ready, in the best traditions of American big business, to pick himself up and start from scratch all over again.

Besides, he was happy in his home life. He dearly loved his wife. Giselle had appealed to him from the first because she made such a striking contrast to all the other woman—adventuresses and ladies of easy virtue—he had known in his hectic career. She had the beauty of some inner quality of truth and sincerity allied to sophistication, warmth and emotional responsiveness which made her the perfect complement to a bohemian like André. She was the stabilising influence he needed. It was thanks to the sense of security and complete harmony which he enjoyed in his home life and relationship with Giselle that André was able now to face his reverses of fortune with optimism and unfailing resilience.

He was well aware of this and never ceased thanking his lucky stars for his choice of a life partner. The rare, ideal happiness of the couple was obvious to all and quoted by their friends as an example of what marriage should be.

First arrivals at the party were Dr. and Mme. Raffec. Hearing their car draw up, André hurried out to meet them in the garden. In a moment he and the doctor were deep in conversation over a drink, while Giselle looked after Linette.

The doctor's wife was bursting with curiosity. Looking round with an air of mystery, she asked in a hushed voice:

"Where is she?"

"Dressing for the party."

"She obviously means to dazzle! . . ."

"With her wardrobe, my dear, she won't have much difficulty."

"Giselle—what a buffet! You're certainly doing the honours for your sister in grand style."

"Half-sister, Linette," corrected Giselle.

"Oh! I didn't know. . ."

"My father was married twice, and Anna was the child of the first marriage."

"Imagine. . . and you never told me that!"

"Well, there never was any reason for telling you, was there? We've hardly spoken about Anna, away over in Paris married to a rich husband—I mentioned that, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. He was a currency exchange agent, wasn't he?"

"That's it. His death has left Anna extremely well off."

"You don't say!.."

"I do! Anna's literally worth millions!"

"Then your Anna is the answer to the poor man's prayer: a widow, rich, young and beautiful!"

"Absolutely."

"What fun! Right here she's only got to flicker her eyelashes to have a queue of candidates waiting on bended knee at the door!"

"It's odd, isn't it?" reflected Giselle aloud, "to think that she was bored with Paris under the circumstances, and had this sudden impulse to come and visit us of all people—practically the Robinson Crusoes of the Ganges!"

"Well, anyway, you're both going to reap the benefit. It's a sort of mutual rediscovery."

"I'm fond of Anna," continued Giselle. "She's ten years older than I, terribly reserved, gets worked up over things, but keeps it all to herself, you know. You never know what she's thinking—or feeling. She reminds me of those Japanese volcanoes—boiling up deep down inside and frozen on the surface. All the same, I believe Anna's a good sort at heart, despite her cold exterior."

"Well! We shall see what we shall see! If she's fond of hunting—with herself as the quarry—she'll find no lack of co-operation round here, . . . I wouldn't mind even betting that this very night at your party there's a preliminary skirmish with a certain individual who is always ready to pounce on an attractive woman like a cat on a mouse!"

"Who are you thinking of?"

"Why, Malouk, of course!"

Giselle's face clouded over at the mention of this name.

"Huh! Don't let's talk about him?" she pleaded. "That man's the bane of my life. There's only one reason why he's been invited here to-night, and that's because we have to keep on the right side of him for business reasons. My husband is rather involved with him at the moment."

"Has he tried to get fresh with you? Something tells me he has. . ."

"Of course! I've often had to put him in his place. I can tell you!"

"I'm not a bit surprised. He had a try with me too, when we first came here, my husband and I. Luckily I hit on just the right formula to keep him at bay. Can you guess?"

"No, what?"

"I told him 'Paws down, Malouk! If you keep trying to maul me around on the quiet, I'll tell my husband and he'll refuse to attend you when you're ill!' . . It worked! He's left me in peace ever since."

"Creatures like him are enough to get the whole white race thoroughly hated in Asia. Not only is his social behaviour deplorable: he's as hard as nails and totally unscrupulous towards his workpeople. His kind would let them die on their feet, slaving to swell his profits."

André left his bar-tending duties for a moment and called over to Giselle:

"I say, darling, we really must get Anna out on show. Dr. Ruffec's getting impatient. Is she waiting for her Paris hairdresser, or what?"

"André, you don't know our Anna! She can spend hours and hours beautifying herself."

"Well, she's already been at it two hours at least!"

Linette smiled and said by way of mollifying André:

"You men don't understand what it takes for a woman to keep up a high standard of looks!"

"Well, anyway, you two," replied André, "what are you hatching out all on your own?"

"Oh, nothing! I was saying to Giselle that we could have been spared the presence of comrade Malouk this evening. . ."

"You're right! Unfortunately, in view of our close business relations I just couldn't leave him out."

"How I loathe his type! They no sooner set eyes on you than they follow with their hands, and then it's knees under the table. . ."

"Alas!" sighed André, "you don't understand what one has to endure in business!"

"I know! I know! Money—the almighty dollar—makes up for a lot of unpleasant things in those who possess it!"

With that Linette moved away towards the front door to watch the guests arrive.

"Giselle!" she called over her shoulder, "I'm going to help do the honours for you while awaiting the appearance of her imperial highness the Grand Duchess de Vigneul. The men will have to be held in check, you know, . . . but I'll do my best. . ."

André and Giselle remained in serious conversation for a few moments.

"For heaven's sake," he pleaded in an anxious undertone "be careful when you're talking to people about Malouk, Giselle."

"Well, I've already told you what I think of him!"

"I know, chérie, but that's no reason for shouting it from the rooftops. You darling little feather brain, you

spend too much time up in the clouds. You've got to come down to earth—the hard realities. . . You know all about what I owe Malouk. . . Who saved me from catastrophe last year?"

"Yes! And at what a price!"

"Naturally! . . He's not Saint Vincent de Paul, you know! He's hard and unscrupulous, that's all. That's the way to become a millionaire tycoon."

"I'm not such a foolhead as you think, André! I know perfectly well that he made you mortgage all your tea gardens—and that he's got you in the palm of his hand! . . ."

André shook his head in disagreement:

"All the same, Giselle, the fact remains that he helped me out, and I am indebted to him in every sense. If he hadn't lent us the money we might as well have packed up and gone back to France, sold out and bankrupt!"

"I can't help that, he's absolutely revolting and disgusts me more than I can say!"

"I feel exactly the same, darling; but what can we do? Give him the cold shoulder? Never invite him?"

"Oh, if only we could!"

"That luxury is denied us. If I break with Malouk, he can demand ten million rupees before the rainy season. Have you got the money?"

"No."

"Nor have I! And that's the end of it. So now you know! my little one! I know what a bore all this stuff about money is to you, and that's why I spare you as a rule. All I ask is that you possess your soul in patience and be diplomatic with the old boy."

Giselle heaved a sigh and said:

"All right, André."

"Just the effort to be polite and friendly, that's all."

"Throw myself into the jaws of the wolf, eh?"

"No, nothing of the kind!"

"But you know perfectly well that to throw a crumb to that animal is to risk being gobbled up completely!"

"There's no question of anything like that. . ."

"H'm! Well, you know, don't you, that in certain circumstances there's one traditional way for a married woman to help her husband out of a tight spot. . ."

"What do you take me for, Giselle? Surely you know I wouldn't stand for that sort of thing? If this great lustful beast permitted himself any such familiarity with you, he'd quickly become more familiar with the toe of my boot—and I wouldn't answer for what besides, in chastisement."

Giselle impulsively slipped her small hand into her husband's.

"Oh, darling," she whispered, "how glad I am to hear you say that! And talking about Malouk there's something wrong with the fridge we got from his firm. Do you think you can do anything with it?"

"Yes, my sweet, I'll try. You run along and look after the guests. They're arriving. . ."

Giselle went down the verandah steps to welcome the Sandersons, the Bradfords, the Kilburns and the rest of her friends in the English colony, practically all of whom were now in government jobs under the new régime in Delhi. There were also some Bengali couples, the men in white *dhotis* that made them look like Roman senators with their togas hitched up between the legs; the women colourful in their graceful national costume.

Suddenly there appeared the bloated figure of

Malouk dressed in a loose-fitting cream spencer suit, sporting a deep red carnation buttonhole; pomaded, perfumed and freshly shaven. He hurried forward to kiss Giselle's hand, excusing himself for being late.

"Last minute telephone calls, my dear—you know what it's like. I just couldn't get away sooner. And I did want to be the very first to meet the guest of honour."

As he spoke his bloodshot eyes roved impatiently over the garden and front of the bungalow.

"Oh, that's quite all right, Mr. Malouk," Giselle laughingly reassured him. "You've missed nothing. She's still dressing! Anna has never been punctual in her life. The day she married her late husband, Mr. Vigneul, she kept him and the wedding guests waiting for her an hour in church."

Malouk was visibly relieved to find that no one had so far had the chance to forestall him with the unknown beauty from Paris.

Most of the guests had now arrived and the *khitmatgar* was serving drinks. Malouk took up his position. It would be right in Anna's path when she appeared, he hoped; meanwhile he amused himself cornering his hostess and making preliminary soundings, as it were.

"Dear Giselle!" he began, "Do you know that you're the most incorruptible wife in the whole of Bengal?"

"'Incorruptible' isn't quite the word, Mr. Malouk. 'Non-inflammable' is better. Why do you look so surprised?"

"Well—you've been married quite a few years now."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Oh—everyone likes a little change, you know, to relieve the monotony!"



"Not me! I like the same old thing. No exotic dishes for me, thank you!"

"Of course, it would be just my luck! Why must I come across an attractive woman who insists on being faithful to her husband? If was a different story over on the other side of the Hoogli, I can tell you . . ."

"What you say certainly isn't very flattering to the European women round here!"

"Aw! Pshaw!" protested Malouk, breaking into a hearty laugh that shook his tightly-buttoned paunch, "Look here, little girl, I'm a realist. I'm not afraid to see things—and women—as they are. My experience of women's that they're like a lot of good things to eat—dessert fruits, for instance. There are the hard nuts to crack—bourgeois misses playing at being virtuous. At the other extreme you have the soft juicy mandarines that can be disposed of in a matter of seconds—they're the ladies of easy virtue who give their favours as lightly as they smoke a cigarette. Well, my taste inclines me to a happy medium between the two."

"Your taste, or your wallet?"

"My dear, you know perfectly well that a man who is fool enough to attempt the conquest of a woman without money is like a big game hunter without a gun. I remember a pretty little girl I used to take out who would say, after a nice dinner somewhere: if you want to give me a real thrill, there's nothing like a real fat cheque! Well, let's face it—that's the way things are nowadays."

Such sentiments from Malouk did not surprise Giselle in the least, but she pretended to be scandalised.

"What cynicism!" she exclaimed.

"Not at all; only realism. Everything can be bought,

my dear. What is not for sale has no value. It's only fit for the scrap heap."

"Oh, thanks a lot! I'm not for sale!"

"Joke over!" said Malouk perceiving that he had rather put his foot in it. "Listen, chick, I want to talk to you seriously."

He took Giselle by the arm and led her further into the gathering shadows of the porch.

"Now, listen, my sweet. I'm heartily sick of all the white women—or nearly all—living within a radius of four hundred miles of Calcutta."

"With the exception of Linette and myself, I trust!"

"Precisely! You're the exceptions to this rule. Let's take that as understood. Well, now, here you have a ravishing beauty—your sister—just arrived. I've often admired her photograph when I've come to see you. I think she's terrific!"

"Of course, you're going to take a few soundings?"

"You bet! She's a widow, isn't she? In that case she can't try the faithful little wife act. There's no question of being unfaithful to a chap who is now buried in the LaChaise Cemetery in Paris, is there? Right! Then I warn you that I mean to lay the siege, beat down all silly resistance."

"You certainly have a chivalrous way of expressing yourself! .

"I've already told you, I'm a realist. Besides, have you any objection?"

"Oh, not at all. . Who knows? With your tact and diplomacy you may succeed. In any case, that's Anna's affair! She's older than I. I'm not my sister's chaperon."

"Yes, but you can help. I rely on you to prepare the ground a bit!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Oh—encourage Anna to have a good opinion of me. . . Make my task a bit easier, you know!"

Giselle turned to Malouk with a mocking expression in her eyes and exclaimed:

"Ah! So, you're not big and strong enough to manage by yourself? I always thought you were the kind of man who admits no opposition."

"Look here Giselle, I'm convinced you can either wreck my hopes—or lend a helping hand. Now I'll put all my cards on the table, and make you an honest offer."

"Honest? From you? . . ."

"Yes, from me! I believe in fair dealing, but I have no scruples with those who try to get the better of me. I crush them! Whereas those who help me are always rewarded. Now, Listen! This very day I received a magnificent seven carat diamond from the Cape. It will be yours—your *bakhchich*—if you will just help me a little. You see, your honour isn't threatened in the least. This is purely a business arrangement."

"As I have already told you, Anna is my *elder* sister, and I'm not her guardian."

"That's got nothing whatever to do with it. Think well over what I've said—it'll be worth it!"

The arrival of some more guests put an end to their talk. Giselle started telling the women stories about Anna's luggage having gone astray and that her evening dresses only turned up just before dinner—anything to explain her continued non-appearance. Giselle's private opinion of her sister's behaviour was that she was overdoing the preparations for the stunning, dramatic entrance she apparently intended to make.

André was of the same mind.

"If Anna doesn't appear within three minutes," he whispered to his wife, "I'm going to drag her out by the hair."

He was spared the trouble. A few moments later the door, leading from her room was flung wide open to admit Madame Vigneul.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Skirmish and Clash*

**I**F Anna had planned to make an impression on her first appearance, she certainly succeeded. A progressive hush spread over the company as she advanced into the room where every pair of eyes was rivetted on her, at first in stupefaction, then in admiration. At that moment her worst enemy could not have denied her the title of the most beautiful, the most seductive and the best-dressed woman in the room.

The Memsahib from Paris, as Lakshmi called her, had seen fit to make her debut in the backwoods of the Bengal jungle in one of Balmain's latest and most lavish creations. It had a crinoline skirt that billowed out in a diamanté-spattered froth; a bodice of peach satin that moulded her figure like a second skin—and revealed plenty of it in a daring décolletage. Everything worn with the gown—the evening slippers, the little hand-bag of rose pink pearls, the necklace of rubies adorning Anna's throat—had obviously been chosen with care and was in the best of taste.

The women present took in every detail of this dazzling get-up at a glance: the men confined their attentions to the face, and the shoulders and the bosom of the wearer.

Anna had the beauty and the coldness—at least in appearance—of a Greek statue. Her slightly aquiline nose, her carefully made-up lips, every feature was in perfect proportion. Only her eyebrows seemed out of harmony, for they had been pencilled more arched than their natural line and gave to her deep blue eyes a strange equivocal expression that was difficult to fathom. It was disturbing to wolves and wives, but for different reasons. Those deep blue eyes of hers held a further fascination in the contrast they offered to the red highlights of her short cropped hair. Her natural grace of carriage helped out the general impression. She was not exactly a flirt, but she obviously knew how to intrigue an admirer and would be a formidable rival to any woman who got in her way.

Giselle hastened to introduce her sister all round, and the fact that Anna knew some English was a help in that mixed company. Malouk took good care to be the first man to meet the glamorous visitor. He had been waiting for this moment for forty minutes, passing the time in extreme boredom talking to Mr. Sen the Hindu administrative officer for the district of Chandernagor. Now he thought nothing of breaking off his conversation in the middle of a sentence and charging forward to kiss the hand of the woman whom he saw was even more strikingly beautiful than her photographs made her out to be.

Anna became immediately the centre of attention and sensed that she was making a hit. To make doubly sure of monopolising everyone's attention she raised her voice above the murmur of conversation and tinkle of glasses to address her sister.

"Giselle! Giselle!" she called out. "I nearly died of

fright in my room just now. What do you think I saw? An enormous lizard walking on top of the mosquito net!"

"You silly thing. There's nothing to be afraid of," Gisele called back at her. "He's a friend of the family—eats up all the unpleasant insects. Most voracious, but quite harmless."

Dr. Russell hastened to calm the fears of the visitor.

"Ah, Madame," said he, "now that you're in Asia—even though it is your first visit—you may as well resign yourself to such encounters. There's a pretty formidable collection of livestock round here. At first they may worry you, but you'll soon get used to them. Besides, they have their uses. When you come to see us, I'll have much pleasure in introducing you to our tame mon-goose. He's a dear little chap, but he's fatal to cobras. .

"Believe me, you're not the only one to make mistakes, though. When my wife first arrived in Nigeria—where I used to practise before coming here—she pointed out a 'beautiful flower' one day. What do you think it was? The rosy rear of a hamadriyad monkey!"

Anna laughed. "Oh, don't worry, doctor," she told him, "I'll soon get acclimatised. I assure you I won't confuse the back of a monkey with a rhododendron bloom!"

The guests were drifting out among the flowering bourgainvillea and begonia in the garden. Dance music softly relayed from the house, turned the silent movement of the glow-worms, as they darted beneath the foliage of the climbing lianas, into a fluorescent ballet.

Giselle and Anna found themselves alone together for a moment fanning themselves on the cool verandah. Anna was glad to be away from the men, and to have this opportunity to talk to her sister.

Giselle started the conversation.

"Anna," she said in a voice that was little more than a whisper, "I must put you wise about some of the people here to-night."

"Excellent! That's just what I was waiting for! To start off with who is the fat porcupine who talks such a lot of boring nonsense? The one who was bombarding me with silly compliments?"

"That's Malouk—very important, very wealthy. He owns about 50,000 acres of tea at Sylhet and has a finger in absolutely every kind of business in Bengal. I warn you, he means to go all out to make a conquest of you. What he's done so far is nothing but a beginning."

"My word! That's a delightful prospect! And the nice doctor, what about him?"

"He's Doctor Ruffec, the best doctor in Chander-nagor."

"He seems a very decent sort."

"He is. His wife, Linette, is my best friend here. She's got a bit of a past—she was a night club singer before she married—but her heart's in the right place. The Indians adore her. She looks after them with a really selfless devotion."

"And the whites... Do you often have these get-togethers?"

"What do you think? There's not much to do here, is there? We form a sort of informal social club—we're bound to stick together."

Anna absent-mindedly fingered her ruby necklace



and cast an appraising eye over her half-sister. That little ready-made silk dress she was wearing—it came, she guessed, from one of the stores in Calcutta. It had 'provincial' written all over it. It was just the sort of thing she, Anna, would have given to her maid in Paris. Colonial life was not, she perceived, all roses; comfort had to be sacrificed, and as for riches, they were to be found chiefly in the overwhelming wealth of jungle vegetation to be seen everywhere.

Anna's notions about life in the jungle were limited to what she had read in Kipling. In the twenty-four hours since she had come into contact with it she couldn't help unconsciously comparing Chandernagor to a fragile raft with shipwrecked people clinging to it in a great green ocean which threatened to engulf it at any moment.

Awaking from her reverie she remarked, as if thinking aloud:

"I was full of curiosity about the kind of life you and André were leading here. . ."

"You should have come long ago, since you didn't keep up any other kind of contact. You never wrote!"

"Oh, my husband, you know, was always so pre-occupied with his business. . . Then his long illness kept me stuck in Paris."

"Tell me, Anna,—if it's not indiscreet to ask—you are now very rich, I imagine?"

"Yes, I suppose so. After tax deductions and death duty, the estate will be worth about 300,000,000 francs."

"A nice little competence, eh? I'd like to have met your husband. I wish you could both have come."

"He was too old to risk catching Asiatic fevers, not

to mention the fact that he was frightened of mosquitoes and snakes."

"Nowadays, as you know, one can be inoculated against all those things."

"And, so, you're quite happy living among the savages?"

"Anna! You mustn't say that! They're not savages. After all, they've got five thousand years of civilisation behind them. They have their artists, poets, and philosophers. . ."

Anna changed the subject. As far as she was concerned, anyone whose skin wasn't white was a savage.

"Tell me, Giselle, is André a good husband?"

"We just couldn't be happier—it's like a permanent honeymoon."

"Never a cloud in the sky, eh?"

"In our personal relations, no."

"And otherwise?"

Giselle heaved a sigh and after a moment's pause said:

"In our material circumstances things are less bright."

"How's that?"

"André is in difficulties over his tea gardens. . ."

"Financial?"

"Yes. . . mortgages, loans, interest, balance sheets that won't balance. I'm no good at figures, but André'll explain it all to you, if you like. All I can tell you, my dear Anna, is that life in the Far East is no gold mine. You can make a fortune, but you can lose one, too. And we are not the only ones to find that out and console ourselves with the stark fact that all around us are 50,000,000 pariahs who simply haven't enough to eat."

"You knew, when you were marrying André that you were going to live out here?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not complaining."

"You are wise. The essential thing is that you are happy. Tell me, is it true that all white men in India take native women as their mistresses?"

"Pooh! That's the sort of thing you read in novelettes!"

"Go, your beloved André is not falling for some bronze venus?"

"No, no! Nothing like that—he's honorable, you know."

"I noticed you have a very attractive little Indian maid. . ."

"Lakshmi. She's utterly devoted to me. I saved her life once when she might have died of typhus. Now, in return, she'd leap into a furnace for me."

"But not into your husband's bed?" suggested Anna quietly as she idly fingered the rubies round her neck.

Such a remark from her sister was not to Giselle's liking, and she quickly changed the subject.

"Talking of husbands, now that you are a widow, have you any plans for re-marrying?"

"No, certainly not! Widows console themselves and pay off old scores by remaining widows!"

"Well, at the moment, anyway, you hold all the trump cards, you've only got to lift your little finger to have a queue of suitors lining up. In fact, you don't even need to lift a finger. . ."

"Stuff and nonsense, my dear! Every man who whispers sweet nothings isn't a prospective husband."

At this point in their discussion Linette came tiptoeing up to Giselle, leaned over her and said, with the air of one imparting a confidence:

"I suppose you know your sister has already made one terrific conquest?"

"Who? Malouk?"

"Who else do you suppose?"

Turning to Anna, Linette added, with laughter in her voice:

"You should have seen him, Madame! Honestly, never in my life have I seen a man of his age acting so much like a love-sick adolescent!"

"Oh, you're joking. . ."

"No, I'm not. I've been watching him for a quarter of an hour. He's like a dog that's got the scent of a partridge. He can't stay put an instant; constantly roving round and round, in and out, everywhere in the hope of running into you! When he's talking to someone, his eyes are following your movements all the time—watching for the chance to get you alone. Oh, it's too laughable!"

Anna didn't know what to say. Beneath her mask of amused indifference she was secretly flattered.

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Linette under her breath. "He's coming over this way. A moment ago he was by that pool where the mauve lotuses are asleep. He's making for this spot, but spying out the country first. Look! Now he's hiding behind that eucalyptus tree. . . doesn't want to be seen. . . mustn't be too obvious! How would you like to try an experiment, Madame Vigneul? Giselle and I'll leave you alone, and in less than one minute you'll see him swooping down on you like a hawk on a sparrow."

Anna was finding the situation highly entertaining and readily agreed. "

"All right, let's see what happens. You two go away, and I'll bravely await the bird of prey."

Gérille and Linette disappeared into the lounge, and stood in one of the windows behind a curtain from which they had a good view of Anna and the garden. Everything happened exactly as Linette had said. Hardly had they been gone a moment when up came Malouk, apparently in a great hurry. Anna, from where she was leaning against the verandah railing, looked him straight in the face, with an expression of the utmost surprise on her own.

"Looking for something?" she asked.

"Yes, and I've found it!"

"What?"

"The opportunity I've been waiting for. . ."

"What opportunity?"

"To talk to you away from all these stupid, boring people!"

"Really? Have you got something special to say to me?"

"A great deal!"

"And in private?"

"Decidedly in private! Although you are not aware of it, I've known you a very long time."

"Impossible! What *are* you talking about?"

"I have often seen your beautiful photograph on Pelissier's desk and always wondered if ever I should have the pleasure of meeting the original. Now my wish is granted and in gratitude I'd gladly go on my knees before every tin-pot idōl in India!"

"You astonish me!"

"Nonsense! What's the good of false modesty? You know—you must know—you were bound to captivate me!"

"I'm overwhelmed. . ."

"Out here in the jungle a man doesn't get much of a chance, you know. We're starved of the right sort of female society, I can tell you! It's a celibate life whether you like it or not in this place!"

"But you've got plenty of attractive young Bengali women for the asking."

"Yes, that's true, but there are many pitfalls for a white man who goes in for that sort of thing. Far better leave them alone."

"Please explain. I'm afraid I'm very ignorant. . ."

"Easy! Mind you, I'm not talking about Asia at the moment. Things are a bit different here. But I've lived in Africa quite a while too, and this is what happens when you go after a dusky damsel there. A few banknotes, a few presents—something for mamma and something for papa (including half a dozen bottles of strong liquor)—will get you your young black woman delivered carriage paid and duty free right into your cabin. What happens? She goes with your servants one after the other, the house boy, the cook, the groom, whoever else there may be. Then the only thing to do, if you have any sense, is to give her back to her mother with a good hiding and a good kick in the behind. If you don't do that, you're finished. You've lost face and the blacks will never have any respect for you again."

"Oh, you're a pessimist!"

"Not at all; but now you see why when suddenly a pin-up girl like you descends. . ."

"Pin-up! Ha-ha!"

"...when a pin-up girl such as you lands in these parts, one loses no time in —er putting to her certain propositions. . ."

"Dishonourable ones?"

"Certainly not. Perfectly natural, normal ones. Look here, Anna, let's be frank—I'm interested in you!"

"And you're already calling me 'Anna'. . ."

"Well, I've known you for a year!"

"And I've known *you* twenty minutes!"

"Between us that strikes the happy medium!"

Malouk had come close to Anna and, with his usual familiarity, grasped her bare arm.

"Anna, you're quite alone here. You're going to be bored to death with your relations," he pursued, while his enormous hand moved up the bare arm to the shoulder. "I've got a fine modern bungalow at Sylhet. It's at your disposal. . ."

Gently, but firmly Anna disengaged herself from the exploring hand.

"You're getting fresh rather quickly, aren't you?" she asked sharply.

"The moment I saw you come into the room to-night I told myself: 'Here is the woman of my life?' "

"Indeed! And you didn't stop to ask yourself whether you could be the man of my life!"

"With a little patience you'd soon find you wouldn't be able to do without me!"

The big perspiring hand was laid again on Anna's arm. She shook it off, feeling disgusted and irritated by Malouk's painfully obvious haste. To make her action doubly clear, she moved away from him, but he followed and stood close to her again. In a moment Anna felt that he would be taking her in his arms. The very

thought of it made her feel sick. Stepping backwards quickly, she said:

"Let me have a good look at you."

"By all means. Looking costs nothing. It shows a profit in fact."

Anna knew from experience that men of Malouk's type needed firm handling. They had thick skins, and a certain amount of brutality might be called for. Looking him over like an army doctor examining a new recruit, she said slowly and deliberately:

"Let's see! You're no longer exactly in the bloom of youth. . . You're bald. . . got a corporation. . . Your hands are fat and perspiring. . . bags under the eyes—in fact, you have everything! You're bursting with sex appeal!"

"My word! You've certainly put me on the spot!"

"No, I'm merely considering you in detail."

"There's nothing wrong with me except that I'm a bit over-weight."

"That's too obvious!"

"Do you know why I like you so much? Because you take a savage delight in tearing me to pieces! I find it stimulating. I can't bear milk and water misses who practically throw themselves under your feet. You, at least, show spirit. You remind me of a mettlesome thoroughbred, and I should say you're capable of lashing out with some vicious kicks! . . ."

"What do you take me for—a race-horse on parade? Right! Then kindly note I do not require a stable hand."

"Just wait a minute, will you? I told you just now that paying attention to me pays dividends."

"How much? Eight per cent?"



Malouk lowered his voice. He had decided to change his tactics, be more subtle, insinuating.

"Look here," he began in a confidential tone which he hoped was tempting. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, no sacrifice would be too great. I know you're well off, but all the same an attractive woman can do with something extra to maintain her high standard. Cosmetics, hairdressing, 'bra's.' (Here Malouk cupped his big ham hands in front of his chest to suggest a woman's bosom. Anna mimicked his gesture and said: "Thanks for the film star curves!"). . . "All that—and nice things to eat and drink—I'd see that you had, and much more, besides up to a very substantial figure!."

"Substantial figure? How much?" asked Anna, now deliberately leg-pulling.

The irony in her tone was lost on Malouk. He was overjoyed at her straight question; thought it meant she was ready to sell herself for a good offer. He made some quick mental calculations, was torn for some moments between his natural avarice and reckless generosity. Too small an offer would get him laughed at and snubbed, he knew. Finally he leaned over and whispered into Anna's ear:

"Twenty thousand rupees a month."

At this dramatic point they were observed by a pair of extremely sharp eyes, those of Lakshmi, Giselle's little Hindu maid. She had been instructed by her mistress to help with serving the refreshments, and very nice, she looked too as she went on her way, bare-shouldered, an embossed silver bracelet round each slender ankle, grace in her movements, a smile on her face.

She glimpsed Anna and Malouk through a bead curtain and stood stock still, fascinated and curious.

"Twenty thousand rupees a month," mused Anna, playing the part of a greedy mercenary woman who is allowing herself to be tempted, "How much would that be in French money?"

Malouk took the opportunity of another confidential whisper to get his nose close to Anna's perfumed hair and skin.

"A little more than a round million francs a month for your ladyship's pin money!"

Anna didn't flinch from the hot breath and the great thick lips so close to her ear. She was now too well into the part she was playing, and enjoying.

"A million a month!" she repeated in an awe-struck whisper, as she heaved a sigh of mock cupidity and turned her amazed gaze upwards to the starry vault of the sky.

For a moment Malouk thought that he had been over-generous, and that he should have got better terms for such a royal offer; but what mattered, he told himself, was that this so-desirable memsahib from Paris was by degrees giving way. She was being dazzled by the prospect he dangled before her.

Anna for her part was taking a sadistic delight in drawing out the comedy. She kept her eyes on the sky and her shapely white hands on the balustrade in front of her. Then, as if ashamed to turn to Malouk and openly pursue the negotiations, she repeated softly:

"A round million in hard cash every month? That and nothing more?"

Malouk experienced the momentary disillusion of a purchaser who thinks the deal is over when the vendor

starts haggling to put the price up. However, son of the Levant crossed with Albanian blood though he was, and notwithstanding thirty years practice in every kind of shady hard bargaining—cut-price women included—he was now ready to throw all caution to the winds.

“What do you mean with your ‘round million in hard cash and nothing more’? Certainly that’s not my idea. There’d be plenty more. I thought of adding a sports Jaguar if you fancied one.”

“The finest model Jaguar?” asked Anna, somewhat at a loss for suitable commentary to keep the ball rolling.

“Sure! The most luxurious model. You could choose the colour.”

“And when I’d take off my gloves after driving, what would you suggest to adorn my wrist?”

“A fine bracelet.”

“A really beautiful one?”

“Oh—exquisite. .”

Malouk launched into a recital of Anna’s future presents, coming closer to her as he did so. Finally, standing pressed up against her, he seized her two forearms and, in a voice hoarse with lustful appetite, panted out:

“H’m! How’s that? You can’t say I’m mean over trifles, can you? Ah, but you don’t know, you can’t know how much I love you already—how much I want you—how I . . . I . . .”

He broke off unable to find any more words. His bloated, convulsed face was more eloquent than any he could have found. Anna’s profile was still turned towards him. Suddenly he swivelled her round, grabbed her in a violent embrace and bent over to kiss her lips.

A sharp resounding smack in the face prevented him.

It was delivered just at the moment when Lakshmi, who had witnessed the whole scene, parted the bead curtain—and emitted a shriek of merry laughter.

Malouk rounded on her in a rage of humiliation, for he had lost face in front of a native. Lakshmi just managed to put down the tray of refreshments she was carrying, but didn't have time to escape before Malouk seized her by the shoulders, shook her like a rag doll and spat out from between his teeth:

"Filthy little bitch! I've a good mind to flay the skin off your rump to teach you some good manners!"

In terror, Lakshmi wriggled out of his frenzied grasp and took to her heels.

Anna had not moved. She was shocked by the behaviour of this great hulking brute. In a perfectly controlled voice she said:

"Mr. Malouk, if anyone here needs a lesson in good manners, it's you, I should say."

Malouk's blood pressure and respiration had shot up considerably in the past few seconds of thwarting anticlimax to an emotional scene. He was breathing like an overworked ox as he straightened the red carnation that had gone awry in his buttonhole and made a last desperate effort with Anna.

"You must excuse me! I'm sorry, but you don't understand. It's a question of the prestige of the white races. It's no joke. One can't indulge in pleasantries in this country."

"I'm not joking or indulging in pleasantries, I assure you. And, now that the comedy is all over, you can take back your fine presents, your Jaguar and bracelet, and put them along with the smack in the face I gave you."

"Really, you do take offence easily!"

"Indeed! Do you think so?" countered Anna, and her voice—the voice of a woman who had been insulted—took on the chilling, cutting quality of ice. "Well, in future I shall be much obliged if you will kindly restrict your woman-handling to those unfortunate creatures whose circumstances are such that they have no alternative but to be your playthings. What is there to prevent you from ordering ladies of easy virtue by telephone from Calcutta? They, no doubt, will be delighted with your charming caresses."

This was a terrible blow to Malouk's pride. He was conscious of having put his foot into everything. He saw now how he had been made a complete fool of by this beauty, and suddenly there surged up in him an overwhelming desire to smack her face, to turn up her fabulous Paris gown and spank her, to abuse her in the kind of language he would apply to some common prostitute who hadn't done what she was told. The thought of the scandal that would ensue if he gave vent to his feelings helped him to master them. He contented himself with hissing from between clenched teeth as he shot Anna a look of intense hatred:

"I don't require your advice, thank you!"

"It would appear, though, that you do from the disgusting way in which you have conducted yourself this evening in your friends' house,"

With that Anna swept off in the direction of the lounge. On the way she met André. He saw there was something wrong and asked good-naturedly:

"Does the sight of me drive you away, Anna dear?"

Anna indicated Malouk:

"Your friend there will explain," she said shortly, and walked quickly away.

André turned to Malouk.

"I don't get it. What's up?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all. Your sister-in-law has been giving herself the airs of an offended prima donna, that's all."

"And why, pray?"

"Oh, because I had the presumption to start making love to her—hardly a sufficient cause to justify this scandalised dowager act. But, don't let's talk about that. . . By the way, Pelissier, it will be necessary, you know, to come and see me before the end of the month."

"So you said this morning."

"I hope the heat doesn't affect your memory."

"Oh, don't worry; no fear of that, old chap."

"Personally I have nothing to fear. I simply wanted to remind you that your bills mature. That's all. You must excuse me. I'm going out for a breath of fresh air. It's suffocating here."

## CHAPTER V

### *"Death is Stalking A'round"*

GISELLE'S guests included one couple who were noticeable for their reserve, the circumspection of their bearing and their genuine modesty. They were Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson who ran the American Mission in Chandernagor and district.

Burton Phineas MacPherson was a minister of the sect called "Followers of the Divine Word" founded in California by a multi-millionaire who had made his money in Bombay, and hoped to buy the salvation of his soul with a bequest of ten million dollars to the Divine Wordists for the purpose of spreading the Christian faith in India. MacPherson and his wife, Daphne, a plump, pink and dimpling little woman from Louisiana, rented a huge house at Chandernagor and turned it into the headquarters of the Sect.

Burton MacPherson, or B.P. for short, was very popular in the region. The funds placed at his disposal enabled him to do good work, especially among the untouchables who readily embraced Christianity because of all the useful gifts it brought them, from cans of condensed milk to clothing and household goods. In the little Mission chapel they gabbled through hymns such as "He is born, the Divine Infant", while Daphne

played the accompaniment with one hand on the harmonium, and beat time with the other. In the ecstasy of this pious exercise, her steel-rimmed spectacles usually dropped off her nose on to the keyboard.

The corpulent B.P. was a good sort, much inclined to optimism, talkative, ready to go to any lengths to save from eternal damnation the souls of the pagans around him. The Europeans in the district liked B.P., invited him and his better half to their homes and did all they could to help the couple in their efforts to wean the natives from their cult of barbaric animal-gods.

At the Pelissiers' party they were sitting in the garden in front of a screen of dwarf mango and pepper trees, quietly sipping their orangeades and watching from a distance the goings-on, especially those around Madame Vigneul.

"What do you think of our hostess's sister?" asked Daphne.

"My dear," replied B.P., "I should say she's what the worldly call a 'fine woman'".

Daphne nodded.

"Well, without being uncharitable, I should say she's totally lacking in discretion to appear here in that carnival get-up. It's the kind of dress you see on the screen, but don't expect to see on the back of a good Christian."

Being the wife of a missionary did not make Daphne any the less of a woman, so that she was naturally sore when she compared, as she couldn't avoid doing, Anna's Balmain creation with her own plain white dress with its high round neckline and for sole adornment a little gold cross worn on a black velvet ribbon.



B.P. knocked the ash off his cigar and asked:

"Is she staying long?"

"Some months, Mrs. Pelissier told me."

"In a few months a woman of her type can do a lot of damage, break up homes, ruin men's lives."

"Ah! May God watch over and protect them!" piously ejaculated Daphne, with a deep sigh, knowing that she had nothing to fear on the lines indicated from her beloved B.P.

Like the good soul she was, though she sympathised in advance with the English-speaking wives in the neighbourhood whose husbands were exposed to the temptation of Madame Vigneul's rare and seductive beauty.

"Did you notice that fat pig, Malouk, going after her?"

"I should have been surprised if he hadn't done so," replied B.P. "That rascal millionaire who has never given us a rupee for our poor, is certainly going to raise the siege on Madame Vigneul."

"Do you think he'll succeed, B.P.?"

"My dear, I prefer to have no opinion."

After puffing for a moment at the cigar he had let go out and was re-lighting, B.P. concluded:

"These things are the works of Satan."

André stood watching Malouk go down the five steps into the garden. He was puzzled. What, he asked himself, could have happened between Anna and Malouk to put the fat old swine in such a bad mood all of a sudden? Before meeting Anna he was all smiles and geniality. Never had André seen him in better humour. Could it be that Malouk had gone a little too far with

Anna? He knew Anna was far from straight-laced; at the same time she wouldn't tolerate undue familiarity from anyone.

The whole thing was most unfortunate in view of the extremely delicate state of his business relations with this ridiculous pachyderm at the moment. André lit a cigarette to ease his perplexed state of mind and was standing smoking it with his back to the lounge, when Lakshmi appeared, her face wet with the tears of laughter which she was vainly trying to suppress.

"What are you finding so amusing, Lakshmi?" asked André.

"Oh! My! It was fun! Tee-hee! Hee! Ha-Ha!" giggled the girl.

"Why? What was funny?"

"The lovely big smack she gave him—biff! Just like that!"

"What big smack?"

"The one the Sahib got straight across his face. . . It went wallop-slop! Just like a big coconut falling off a tree! Oh, lovely!"

"What on earth are you blethering about, Lakshmi?"

"Me—I see it all! The Sahib Malouk was mad—and red in the face, like a turkey-cock that wants to get at the hen. . . First he try to kiss the Memsahib Vigneul. . . She give him the big slap on the face—biff! Clack! The Sahib in a great rage because Lakshmi see! He say: 'Get out, or I'll. . .' Oh, I no tell the words he use, they ugly. . ."

So, that was it, thought André, now fully aware of the gravity of the situation. He turned and saw his wife standing there looking worried. She had heard the end of Lakshmi's recital. She told the girl to go, and asked:

"What's going on, André? I've just seen Anna looking mighty upset. She told me she had to put Malouk in his place."

"According to Lakshmi she smacked his face!"

"He asked for it! He told me he intended to make passes at her, and he must have behaved, as usual, like a clumsy brute."

"H'm. . . It's most unfortunate, you know. If on the very day she arrived Anna gets out of step with the man who holds us in the palm of his hand, we're going to be in a fine kettle of fish!"

"Why didn't you warn her?"

"What about you?—Why didn't you?"

"What are you talking about? How could anyone warn her? He seized the very first chance to have a cosy chat with her, and then put his great big feet in it!"

"Luckily nobody witnessed what happened apart from Lakshmi. All the same, we'd better have a word with Anna. She's given Malouk one lesson in—er—*savoir-faire*. Suppose he has a relapse and needs another? That would just about put the lid on everything! Giselle, darling, be a lamb and send your sister along here. I'll have to tell her a thing or two."

"All right, André."

Most of the people at the party only bored Anna and she was delighted with the opportunity to have a chat with her brother-in-law.

"Sit down, Anna dear," he told her. "You know I've scarcely exchanged a word with you since you arrived, I've been so busy. And there's so much we have to tell each other!"

"Well! I must say my first twenty-four hours here

have not been without their little surprises. First, that horrid lizard thing on my bed; next, I'm mauled by one of your two-footed animal friends. . ."

"Whom you slapped!"

"I'm afraid so, He really did go beyond the limit. . . treated me like a street girl!"

"You were right in what you did, Anna. Giselle would have done the same. The only thing is that we happen to be in Malouk's pocket financially, and we have to try to humour him."

"Oh!—I understand, André. I am sorry to be a nuisance. In future I'll soft pedal as far as he's concerned—and bottle up my wrath."

"Poor Anna! Let's not talk about this sordid business diplomacy. Let's talk about you instead. You've no idea how glad we are to see you. Giselle and I often used to wonder whether, if you would come ever. . ."

"I'd been wanting to come for ages, André; but how could I with a sick husband on my hands—and so the years went by."

"Eight years, isn't it?"

"Yes, eight years. . . Have I changed much? Have I aged?"

"You needn't start fishing for compliments! You are exactly the same as when I last saw you. Possibly even more dead with this new hair-do. It suits you marvelously."

"Ha! Thanks! And you André—it's so very strange to find you settled down here married to my sister! . ."

"Yes, strange how life parted us, you and me. We were both poor. You met and married wealth; I found in Giselle consolation for your loss. *Inch' Allah*—it was written!"

"But tell me, you really have found happiness?"

"I have. Giselle has been and is always the best possible helpmate, and that's saying much out here in Asia where for a man who has his way to make, life is not all a bed of roses—believe me."

"So there's never a cloud on your horizon?"

"Not the shadow of one! And I believe Giselle can say the same of me as I say of her. I'm a dependable sort of chap, a faithful—and quite devoted—husband!"

Anna heaved a sigh. Her fingers played nervously with her necklace of rubies; then she exclaimed:

"André! My poor André! Do you know what the most extraordinary thing about you men is?"

"No, what?"

"Your capacity to forget."

"How do you mean that exactly?"

For answer Anna took André by the arm and led him away down the garden to where there was a big stone statue of Buddha in the attitude of contemplation, and a stone bench screened by the hanging tendrils of lianas and the rooting branches of a banyan figtree. They sat down and at once Anna turned to her companion with the question:

"Have you completely erased from your memory our three years of happiness together?"

"Oh no!"

"That's a feeble answer. You say 'no' out of politeness!"

"Not at all!"

"Oh, yes you do! You accepted our separation as a matter of course—told yourself, no doubt, that the best way to get over it was to get married."

"Anna! You're being monstrously unjust. What on

earth would you have me do? You had freely chosen a different kind of life. Did you want me to shut myself up in a monastery, or what?"

"Oh, well, you found happiness, I, wealth."

"It was what you wanted. . ."

"Yes, but I found that money did not compensate for our lost happiness together. Why do you suppose I decided to come to India at the first possible opportunity? It certainly wasn't to study the flora and fauna. It was simply that I couldn't resist the temptation to see you again."

"Ah, that shows what a genuine affection you've kept for us all these years!"

"Above all, André, I felt I had to try to evoke in you some of our precious shared memories. . ."

Memoires—they certainly had plenty. Anna had first met André one evening at the Indo-China Club in the boulevard Raspail. She had nothing but her beauty in those days. She lived alone in a furnished room in Montparnasse, and had a job as secretary in the office of the Equatorial Africa Mineral Research Company. Her pay just enabled her to live; nothing more.

André found her an easy conquest. A fortnight after their first meeting, she became his mistress. During all the time they were together he never learnt anything about her family; didn't know she had a sister. None of Anna's women friends, and least of all her sister, knew about her liaison with the attractive young French man from the Far East. Always a reserved "shut-in" character, Anna confided in no one. This hard core of reserve coupled with difference of temperament and upbringing made the sisters more like strangers.

While Anna fended for herself in the capital, Giselle lived a sheltered existence with an old aunt at Neuilly, and on the rare occasions when the sisters met, Giselle knew better than to attempt to pry into Anna's private life.

When he met Anna, André was in rubber and his business interests necessitated frequent trips between Saigon and Paris. The two were deeply in love. Anna knew he wasn't rich and said she didn't mind. What was more she always refused offers of financial aid from him, and turned her back on his many potential rivals who were better off.

The months and then the years slid by in heedless happiness, until one day Anna realised she was twenty-eight. The thought of being thirty in two years' time filled her with panic. She was growing old, she told herself, and getting nowhere. She had always been vaguely ambitious to get on in the world and make a success of her life. This, she now knew, meant being wealthy—escape from the daily grind of petty economies, being able to buy the furs and jewels in the shop windows, instead of gazing for ever at them in frustration.

She became obsessed by the fear of growing old without realising her dream of riches. The thought of going on tapping a typewriter in an office for her living till she was forty haunted her like a nightmare. André's visits to Paris were merely temporary oases of distraction. His long absences were tortured by the constantly recurring question: "What is to become of me?"

Such was the way things were going for Anna the day the boss of the Equatorial Mining Research Corporation asked her to take a bundle of reports and papers along

to Monsieur Vigneul, the exchange agent in the rue Quatre-Septembre, who looked after their financial interests. On that day a magic gold wand touched Anna's destiny, and changed everything.

Edmond Vigneul was very pleased to see so attractive a representative of the Mining Research Corporation instead of the fussy old male clerk they usually sent; but not till they had finished talking business did he permit himself to relax and enjoy the pleasant surprise. He was a man of some sixty years of age, but no Shylock with dirty hooked fingers clutching money bags. His sleek silver-white hair looked as if it had been accustomed all his life to a silver-braided peaked cap, and so it had. M. Vigneul was a retired colonel of Dragoons; with him the military habit of pride in a well-groomed appearance had become second nature. He was tall and slim, immaculately tailored, wore a monocle, smoked cigarettes out of a gold and amber holder. For the past ten years he had been a widower, and possessed as keen a judgment of values in women as in stocks and shares.

He quickly appreciated that Anna had not only beauty and intelligence, but that, despite her shabby little black suit, she was a woman whose appearance at once proclaimed good breeding, strength of character and a personality above average. When he offered her a cigarette, Anna sensed already a budding bond of sympathy between them.

"It is astonishing, Mademoiselle," he began as an opening gambit, "to find a well set-up young lady like you with a taste for all this stuff—current accounts, returns, balance sheets, interest and all the rest of it. Beautiful eyes were not made for such use!"

Anna took the line of quiet dignity.



"Ah, Monsieur! That is true, but these days a woman must be ready to tackle anything if she is to secure her independence."

"So speaks one of the great army of career women in business. . . stenographers, telephonists, typists, receptionists. . . A brave and beautiful army—well, nearly all beautiful. Would it be very indiscreet, Mademoiselle, to ask if you are married?"

"No! I'm not. I don't work merely for pin money. Like the heroine of Faust, my condition is that of spinster, Monsieur!"

An arch smile accompanied Anna's words, and the ice was broken.

"Take care! Mephistos twice as cunning as Faust's poor fool are all over the place ready to trip you up," laughed Vigneul.

"I know. Thank you for the warning!" tossed back Anna.

"My opinion of you goes up and up, Mademoiselle!"

Vigneul matched his opinion by standing up himself to light a cigarette for Anna. He felt the need for movement to express the lighter mood that was growing on him every moment, and Anna was unconsciously glad of the opportunity to have a good look at this odd flirtatious old boy.

She followed his movements as he walked thoughtfully across the room and back, and then draped himself opposite her in a semi-sitting position over a corner of his desk. She found his tall, lean figure very presentable.

"By the way, Mademoiselle," said he, polishing and adjusting his monocle, "I don't know your name, do I?"

"Anna Roncevalle."

"Well, M<sup>lle</sup>. Roncevalle, it has been a great pleasure to meet you and, as I should very much like to reward your patience for the dreary hour you've spent here poring over these darned files—at which you're most competent, incidently—I was wondering whether you'd do me the favour of dining with me to-night?"

The words "With pleasure" leapt to the tip of Anna's tongue, but she suppressed them and substituted a polite little lie of prestige.

"Oh, this evening, I'm afraid I'm not free."

"Family engagements, I suppose?"

"Yes, and—to-morrow I'm booked too. Friday perhaps. . ."

If he were really interested in her, he would be even more so, Anna argued, if he had to wait three days. . .

"All right, Friday then. . . Oh, but Friday's my bridge night! Well—can't be helped. . . they can find someone else to take my place at the club. Mademoiselle, you meet me at 8.30 on Friday at Laurent's in the Champs-Élysées. There, we'll review the state of the metal market, closing prices in the City and on Wall Street."

M. Vigneul could have winked, but he was much too subtle for that. There was just the right flicker of humour in his eyes to underline the gentle irony of his remarks about the purpose of their next meeting.

Anna left his office feeling she had made a conquest. Wasn't she going to dine with a stranger who was putting off another engagement for the sake of her company?

Vigneul turned up for the dinner more spruce and dapper than ever. The food, the wines, the flirtatious passes even, were all infinitely well-chosen and in the best of taste. There was neither leg-pressing under the

table, nor other obvious attempts at familiarity. Vigneul had the manners of a true gentleman, and apart from this he had a pretty good idea of the kind of woman he was dealing with. Anna, he sensed, was no little office-girl type always game for a cuddle on the boss's knee for another ten thousand francs a month.

They continued to meet at increasingly frequent intervals, and at the end of two months Vigneul proposed. Meanwhile Anna had not been wasting her time. She had checked up on her new admirer, and knew that his offer of marriage was the chance of a lifetime. His estimated capital topped three hundred million francs. He owned property in Paris, a château in Normandy, a villa on the Mediterranean. To say "no" to all that was quite beyond Anna's powers of self sacrifice.

So, next time André came to Paris, he was told just how things stood. Anna did it in the gentlest manner possible, for she was genuinely sorry to end their three-year old affair. She did not have a great deal of trouble pointing out to André the advantages of exchanging her humble bed-sitter in Montparnasse for the Château Vigneul. Being a down-to-earth practical sort of fellow, neither fool, egotist nor sentimental idealist, her lover did not feel justified in raising any serious objections, or standing in her way. Had she been throwing herself into the arms of some penniless gigolo, it would have been different. As things were she was going after the kind of life he knew he would never be able to give her, and he couldn't find it in his heart to blame her.

Whatever their inner feelings they were both sweetly reasonable and parted without scenes or emotional recriminations over a final, melancholy little dinner at

a favourite haunt of theirs on the banks of the Eure. It was fully understood to be the END.

Anna announced her forthcoming wedding to her sister Giselle, for whom it had little interest, and after her marriage the sisters became even more complete strangers to each other than before. Anna was living the life of the rich man's spoiled and petted darling; Giselle continued to vegetate with her old aunt at Neuilly. Neither made any effort to contact the other, for the fundamental difference of temperament and upbringing of the half-sisters was widening the gulf between them. Their only link had been their father's name; in all else they were poles apart.

The same kind of freak of fate that had united Anna and her rich husband was one day to bring Giselle and André together. They met at a friend's informal party. Someone introduced Mlle. Giselle Roncevalle to André, and he just commanded sufficient presence of mind not to jump. Later, when they had been dancing together for some time, he asked this blonde, gentle Mlle. Roncevalle with the frank hazel eyes and the honey-gold skin, whether by chance she had a sister named Anna.

"Yes, a half-sister—my father married twice," she replied. "We hardly ever meet. We were brought up apart. She's married to a rich financier and I believe she's very happy."

André made no comment. He was finding Giselle charming. After that first meeting many others followed. The more he saw of her the more dissatisfied he became with his erratic life; it was time he stopped sowing wild oats and settled down, he told himself. Giselle, too, found André to her taste, probably because he was a

straightforward, uncomplicated character like herself, and also because of the atmosphere of adventure in far-off countries that added a certain glamour to his other good qualities. Finally, observing strictly correct procedure, he asked Giselle's hand in marriage of her guardian, the aged aunt, and was accepted.

Thus he found himself happily married to the sister of his former mistress. The past for him was dead. He decided there was no point in risking the happiness of his bride and himself by raking up that past. That chapter in his life, he thought, was closed.

Sitting side by side on the stone bench beneath the Buddha at the end of the garden on the night of the party, Anna and André found the past was not so dead. It was an embarrassing discovery for André. Anna deliberately set about reviving in him memories which were still fresh and emotionally charged in her.

"Yes, André," she was saying, "as soon as I lost my husband my first thought was to see you again. . . Do you remember the good times we had together? My room in Montparnasse? Our little dinners together? Our romantic, bohemian week-ends in Normandy? . . ."

"I remember. . . It all seemed wonderful, although I was going through a bad patch, and actually we had to rough it."

"Wonderful—because we were in love!"

"We were free. . ."

Anna's face clouded over. She bent her head and murmured:

"Whereas now—all you feel for me is the sort of dutiful regard people have for a distant relation!"

"Distant! Aren't you Giselle's sister? You know perfectly well I still like you, Anna!"

"You like me!" she sighed.

"Well, what would you have me say? I'm married! Giselle worships me, and I hear *Les jeux sont faits*, as they say at roulette."

Anna gave him a long searching look.

"*'Les jeux sont faits!'* You really believe that? You think. . . there are no more stakes to be played?"

For the entertainment of his guests at the party André had hired a Bengali snake-charmer who professed to be able to foretell the future from the contortions of his two serpents. The man arrived towards eleven o'clock and, after some refreshments had been offered him in the servants' quarters, he installed himself with his wriggling assistants in a basket, in the middle of the lawn.

Giselle gathered the guests around. They looked on in fascinated horror and amusement as the charmer opened the basket and two cobra heads writhed upwards with their forked tongues menacingly protruding angrily. Ananda, the charmer, next took out a flute and began to draw from it the most bizarre sounds, the effect of which was to calm and control the snakes. They were soon right out of their basket, standing upright in front of him and gradually doing a sort of rhythmical dance, waving to right and left, going through strange contortions on the grass, in time to the music. The charmer watched their movements attentively while playing the flute and interpreted aloud between notes on his flute. Sen, the Hindu administrator, translated word for word, for the audience.

At first it seemed to be nothing but proverbs and maxims, such as "The tiger roars when night falls";

"Words cannot water dry rice"; "After a fire in the stable, the cows will be afraid of a red cloud at sunset."

The audience smiled and nodded approvingly, but whispered among themselves saying all this had nothing to do with foretelling the future. Suddenly the snake charmer stiffened and stopped playing his shrill flute. The cobras who had been making two circles in opposite directions, stood up, on end hissing angrily and then resumed their circle making. Ananda, the charmer, clearly did not like the look of things. He was muttering to himself, and voices called out:

"What's he saying? We can't hear!"

Sen, the Hindu administrator went up to him and listened to his mutterings, making the man repeat them two or three times. Then the Hindu turned to the audience and said:

"I'm not sure whether I ought to tell you what he's just been saying! . . ."

"Yes! Please do!" everybody chorused.

Even, Malouk who had been looking on with a superior smile, piped up, now apparently restored to better humour.

"Let us hear what the fellow says. We're all old enough for his kind of stories!" he protested, backed by a general murmur of assent.

"Well," announced Mr. Sen. "Ananda says 'These two serpents have seen death stalking round this house'. He even said death would go inside the house before the end of the next moon."

Silence fell on the company as people exchanged shocked glances. A burst of hoarse laughter broke it.

"Doctor!" shouted Malouk, "why don't you send this old idiot to the mental home?"

*Part Two*

CHAPTER I

*Flight to the Jungle*

WHEN Anna had been staying with the Pelissiers three weeks she remarked to Giselle one morning over their English breakfast tea which they were sipping in dressing gowns on the verandah: "So, you're leading a Robinson Crusoe life out here—and liking it?"

"Oh, it's not too bad," answered Giselle. "There are about thirty whites in a radius of ten miles or so. I help Linette in the doctor's clinic, otherwise I might be bored. . . One day is much the same as another. When André and I want to see a film, we take the car into Calcutta."

Anna lit a cigarette, then asked casually:

"When you were coming out to India with him, you knew what you were in for, I hope?"

"Of course! But you know what it's like when you're in love."

"Ah yes! Love is wonderful! You must have been very badly smitten to be willing to come and live here, in this hole, with your eyes wide open!"

"Do you find that so very surprising, Anna?"

"Oh, no, not really. . ."

After a moment's uneasy silence Giselle turned



her chair round so that she was facing Anna and said:

"Look here, Anna, ever since y<sup>ou</sup>'ve been here you've missed no opportunity for sneering at my marriage to André. Surely you don't mean to say that a happily married couple is such a rare phenomenon in your experience? Is this the result of living in high society with Mr. Vigneul, or what? Have you grown so accustomed to broken marriages, deception and disunion between husband and wife that when you come across an honest-to-goodness happily married and obviously devoted couple like us, you regard it as a freak of nature, and me as a sort of curiosity?"

"Not at all! Not at all, my dear! I met your husband once or twice formerly when he was leading a very different kind of life. . ."

"He was a bachelor then and free to live as he pleased."

"Certainly! All the same, I can't help being surprised to find that the gay old André, under your influence, has become such a pattern of exemplary conduct!"

"All right! Let's put it down to the miraculous effect of love—a love miracle!"

"As you like! You're happy, that's the main thing—only don't expect me to envy you your dull, monotonous life."

"Each one to his taste. You preferred to marry a millionaire, and that didn't surprise me. Little though I knew you, I guessed you weren't the kind to go on struggling for a living indefinitely as a typist. . ."

"No, indeed. Life is too short to spend it all struggling for the bare means of subsistence. . ."

"Listen, Anna, since we're talking more or less

openly, there's something I can't quite make out about you. . ."

"Impossible!"

"I mean about your coming here. You're a widow, fabulously wealthy—a château in Normandy, a house on the Riviera and I don't know what besides. You have everything that a woman can possibly desire, yet, hardly have you buried your husband than you turn your back on civilisation and trek out here to the wilds—to see a sister for whom, between ourselves, you never showed much regard in the past! Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd?"

"Not in the least. Widowhood gave me my first chance for a change of scenery. After all, one doesn't want to go on seeing the same old things, faces and places—Deauville, Cannes, Biarritz—for ever and ever. . ."

"And, so you thought you'd go and see your little sister?"

"Naturally."

"And André, too, perhaps?"

The words struck home. Anna stubbed out her cigarette and then asked, as calmly as she could:

"What d'you mean—'André, too, perhaps'?"

"You know what I mean! Your attitude towards him could easily arouse suspicions, if I were the kind of person to be suspicious, which I'm not."

Anna put on a great show of astonishment.

"Well! I? A particular attitude towards him! I never heard such nonsense!"

Giselle ignored this piece of acting and continued in an even voice that was too calmly matter-of-fact for a woman who wanted to pick a quarrel with a rival:

"Don't adopt that line Anna. I'm not trying to make a scene; but the fact remains that the way you behave when André is around would lead one to suppose that he's the one you came to see. This is all the more interesting in view of what you now say about the past. André never spoke to me about you either before or after our marriage. Nor did you about him. Yet you knew each other and both of you have seen fit to conceal the fact."

"Oh! Chance acquaintances, that's all!"

"Maybe."

"I tell you, long before you married him, I had met him at the house of some mutual friends. He seemed nice and friendly, just as lots of other men that I met in those days. That's all there is to it!"

"Except that he made enough of an impression on you to cause you to rush out to India as soon as you could, merely to see him again. . ."

"You first, him second."

"I'd like to believe that, but I'm not convinced you're speaking the truth. I know you, Anna! You never were exactly communicative: in fact, you've always been very secretive as far as I'm concerned."

"You forget that you were far too young to be a confidante of mine."

"You remind me of certain elephants who go into hiding to mate and bring forth their young!"

"Thanks for the compliment. . . in any case, I never did care for the idea of making one's love affairs public property!"

Giselle stood up to fix the hanging tendril of a creeper that grew round the porch, and without looking at Anna continued:

"I only talk this way because for the three weeks that you've been staying here with us, you have shown the kind of interest in André that some people might consider a little. . ."

"A little what?"

"Dubious."

"Get away with you! I'm fond of you both."

"Well! Well! Would you believe it!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because your affection for your brother-in-law looks to me about as tranquil as the waters of the Ganges!"

"So, I've come six thousand miles to be told that! It's just too sweet! A curtain lecture, if you like!"

There was a sound of quick footsteps on the gravel path. It was André coming back home. He waved his khaki toupee and came over to the two women, shaking a playful finger and asking:

"What plot have you two been hatching together?"

To Giselle he added:

"I'll bet Anna was telling you all about the latest Paris fashion shows?"

Anna stood up and went over to André.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "I was telling dear Giselle that a Hindu diet of curried rice is making me fat I'm afraid. I'm sure I've already put on a couple of pounds. Look feel my waist!"

Deliberately provocative, she planted herself in front of her brother-in-law with arms raised, offering him her waist to feel. He laughed and said:

"Don't be silly! You're as slim as ever."

"No, I'm not. Feel, I tell you! Here! I've got two

small rolls just above the hips. . . I'll have to be more careful. . ."

As she was so insistent, André did as he was told, and Anna stood guiding his fingers in the exploration of her alleged rolls of fat.

"Want any help?" Giselle called out.

Anna burst out laughing.

"Really, Giselle!" she exclaimed. "Can't one have a little fun?"

The following afternoon Giselle went to Doctor Ruffec's clinic to help Linette vaccinate the children of a neighbouring village where there had been signs of an epidemic outbreak of fever. André, as was his custom, was in his office getting ready for his weekly four-day trip to his tea gardens at Sylhet, close to the Assam border. To get there you flew from Calcutta to Dacca, the capital of Eastern Pakistan, a matter of one hour in the air, and covered the final stage of the journey by buffalo cart.

Anna walked into his office, sat down and switched on one of her irresistible smiles.

"André, I have a great favour to ask you," she announced.

"What's that?"

"I'm bored! Our little trips to Calcutta with you and Giselle are very nice, but I'd like a change. D'you know what I'd like? I've seen nothing of this part of Bengal, and I'd love to see the real jungle, especially your estate at Sylhet. Would you be a dear and take me along with you? . . ."

"Take you with me to Sylhet?" repeated André in a tone of bewildered astonishment. "Ha! Ha! You've no

idea what you'd be in for! Giselle went several times when we first came here. In the end she found it such a bind and so terrible, ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> being she was glad to get out of it. ."

"Oh, but I've never seen a tea garden."

"There's nothing special to see, I assure you. The Paradenā Gardens of Ceylon and the Shalimar in Cashmere are paradise by comparison."

"As I've never been to Ceylon or Cashmere, and am not likely to be going to either, I'd like to have the chance to go on this little trip with you."

André saw that she meant to have her way and gave up trying to dissuade her.

"Well, if you think you'll enjoy it. . . Have you told Giselle?"

Anna affected to be taken by surprise.

"Why talk to Giselle? Must we get her permission to do something so ordinary and natural?"

"No. . ."

"When are you leaving, then?"

"In an hour's time."

"I'll be ready!"

"I warn you, Anna, there's absolutely no comfort up there. If you think you're going to find a palace, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. One has to sleep rough. . .camping out as best one can."

"Oh, camping! Lovely! . . I'm just going to pack a little case and I'll be with you, André!"

That evening towards seven Giselle returned to the bungalow and was surprised not to find her sister at home. She was still more surprised when she read the following note which she found in her bedroom:

"Darling, I'm just setting out for Sylhet. Don't be worried about Anna's absence. She insisted on coming with me to see how tea is cultivated. It was no use trying to persuade her against it. I'll be back in four days as usual. Love — André."

Here was a new shock for Giselle. Anna had never said one word to her about wanting to go and see the tea gardens. After her solitary dinner Giselle felt she must talk to someone about this new turn of events, and telephoned Linette, asking her to come over. The Ruffes lived barely ten minutes walk from the Pelissier's bungalow. Linette came willingly, because she knew André was away, and thought the sisters might be bored.

She found Giselle lying down on the cushioned settee in the lounge and exclaimed:

"Alone? Your sister gone to bed already?"

Then she noticed Giselle's worried expression and guessed something was wrong.

"Anna's gone," said Giselle, simply.

"Not gone off with that great heap, Malouk?"

"No, silly, with André! They've gone to Sylhet together."

"Just the two of them?"

"Yes."

"Well! the sly things—without a word. . ."

"That's it!"

"So . . ."

"What do you think about it Linette?"

"Oh!—nothing. . ."

"Don't you think it's extraordinary?"

"Yes and no. Your sister wanting to go and see a tea

garden is nothing out of the ordinary. What is rather odd is that she should go off like this without saying a word to anyone."

"André left a note for me. It seems she practically forced him to take her."

"That, I should say, is quite in character with Madame Anna! I can well imagine what happened. She saw André preparing to set out, and suddenly had the notion that it would be nice to go too. The call of the jungle, and all that!"

"But she might have. . ."

"Might have what? Asked you if it was all right to go?"

"Oh, no, but still. . ."

"You should know your sister well enough not to be surprised at anything she does."

Lakshmi appeared carrying a tea tray and the two women stopped talking. When the girl had gone out of the room and closed the door, Linette asked:

"What does Lakshmi think of your sister?"

"She can't bear the sight of her!"

"No, really?"

"That youngster knows by instinct—like an animal—whether a person is good or evil!"

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that Anna's evil!"

"Linette, she is! She's a wicked, ill-natured woman, cunningly hypocritical."

"Oh, surely, you're painting her a bit too black!"

"No, I'm not. We've hardly ever lived together under the same roof before, you know, Anna and I. If you get right down to bedrock this sister of mine is to me a total stranger. You, Linette, are much closer to me than this woman, the child of my father's first marriage. I tell you



life with Anna causes me daily a growing indefinable uneasiness."

"Your imagination is running away with you!"

"Don't you believe it! I feel ~~that~~ I have an enemy under my roof, an underhand enemy who doesn't dare to come out into the open to fight, but prefers to do her dirty work underground."

Linette saw only too plainly Giselle's state of nervous tension, and did her best to calm her down, but without much success. She advised her to take a sedative tablet and go to bed.

Before her friend left, Giselle said with a sigh in all seriousness:

"Linette, dear, I don't believe I shall be able to stand this much longer."

## CHAPTER II

### *The Three Ducks Inn*

NEXT morning's post brought Giselle two letters. One was from her aunt with the usual catalogue of ailments and details of the latest treatment she was having for them; the other, a fat airmailed envelope, bore a Paris postmark and the handwriting of Giselle's old school friend, Madeleine Dollet, who was in the habit of writing once a month with the latest news and scandals of the Left Bank, where she had a secretarial job with the publishers of the popular "Black Beetle" Editions.

That establishment specialised in novels, and Mlle. Dollet's boss, Daniel Vigogne, specialised in the discovery of budding talent. No one who offered him a manuscript was turned down out of hand. If the author happened to be an unmarried mother aged fourteen, a hotel chambermaid with pronounced nymphomaniacal tendencies, a Paris fireman or a goose-girl away in the depths of the country, so much the better. The manuscript received careful attention and editing with a view to making it a phenomenal success. M. Vigogne understood only too well the value of outraged syntax, dirt and pornography in building the reputations of unknown writers.

Not surprisingly, Giselle licked her lips as she unfolded Mlle. Dollet's eight sheets of airmail paper completely covered with typescript. The friend of her childhood, now getting on for thirty, was full of envy of the "exile" away in India, far from the stale monotony of the sixth *arrondissement*, with its café intelligentzia, often pathetic, sometimes comic, but always shabby and unkempt.

Giselle felt a stab of nostalgia for Paris at the very sight of the typewritten pages. Little did she know, as she settled herself comfortably in her extending chaise-longue, what awaited her.

My dear Giselle, (she read)

I have something to tell you that is so unbelievable it has taken me a long time to make up my mind to write to you about it at all. It has been on my mind, tormenting me so much that I assure you I have hardly slept for the past four nights.

My problem was whether it is better to leave a dear friend—you, Giselle—in happy ignorance rather than cause pain, or tell what I have discovered and risk the consequences. Maybe it would have been better—kinder—to have said nothing. Maybe you will curse me for being a busybody and write telling me I ought to have held my tongue. On the other hand you may be grateful to have had your eyes opened. In your place I should certainly prefer a thousand times to have a charitable friend to do that for me.

Well, here goes! Last Saturday one of our author-esses who is quite friendly with me invited me to come and spend the week-end with her in the country near Evreux. The idea of this trip to Normandy appealed to

me, so I said yes I'd love to go, and off we went in her little 8 h.p. runabout. We stayed at a little pub called *The Three Ducks* on the banks of the Eure. Dominique Varel, the woman writer, knew the proprietor, M. Rizoulet and he received us in style. Next day as we sat over the dinner table talking, Dominique invited mine host to join us in a bottle of vintage red wine.

Above the big wide fireplace there was a little stuffed monkey, flanked on either side by a teal and curlew. Dominique pointed to them and jokingly asked the innkeeper whether he had shot the monkey big game hunting in the department of Eure.

"No, baboons aren't to be found at large in the forests of Normandy, Mademoiselle!" he said. "That little animal was given to me by one of my customers who had spent a long time in Africa and the Far East. He'd knocked about all over the place from Timbuktu to Brazzaville and from Shanghai to Colombo. His name was André Pelissier. He's out in India now, and I must say I miss him; he was a really nice chap."

That name, André Pelissier, naturally made me cock an attentive ear. It was so extraordinary to hear about your husband in this inn where I had never set foot before!

"I know André Pelissier!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to say he was one of your customers?"

"Precisely. It would be nine or ten years ago now. He often used to come here for the week-end with his girl friend. And they had a good time, I can tell you! His lady friend was quite a stunner. Let's see, what was she called? Something beginning with an R. . . Anna Roncevalle—that's it!"

M. Rizoulet's revelations astounded me, but I

covered it up as best I could and remarked in a kind of indifferent tone: 'So, M. Pelissier had a good time with his lady friend, did he?'

"A good time? That's an understatement!" said the innkeeper. "I had a ring-side seat to watch the two turtle doves, hadn't I? And, besides, they weren't a bit shy. They had their meals served to them in the arbour-summer house at the bottom of the garden where they just never stopped their love-making for an instant. Clotilde, the waitress had fits of the giggles over it. I remember her saying: 'That couple in the summer house are so busy kissing and cuddling, I dare not go near them without coughing loudly in advance!' Mark you, I didn't blame Pelissier. If it rained all day Sunday, it didn't matter with a little lovebird like the one he had. I can see her now. . . Eyes fit to put the come-hither over a plastered saint, she had! and her figure—oh, boy! There's not a film star in Hollywood who could give her anything!"

When he had drunk our health a second time M. Rizoulet told us the pair of them stayed at his inn on and off for three years, passed their time (apart from 'necking') on the river, fishing, and just loafing around, always on their own—never needed company.

So, there Giselle, would you believe one could stumble by pure chance across such revelations? As you had never told me that André and Anna knew each other before you married, I assumed you knew nothing about all this. And I'm only telling you for your own private guidance, knowing that you are extremely happy in your married life. No doubt that idyllic affair the innkeeper witnessed is as dead as a bunch of pressed violets forgotten between the pages of a book.

Anna's marriage to M. Vigneul would have put an end to all other romantic escapades, you may be sure, so you would be well advised not to start worrying about it now. If, on the other hand, your sister's sudden arrival in Chandernagor seems suspicious, you are armed in advance with evidence against her.

It was the latter consideration that finally decided me to write and tell you everything.

Lots of love.

Yours ever,

Madeleine.

It took Giselle some minutes to begin to recover from the shock of what she had just read. Madeleine's letter had been a cruel knock-out blow as far as she was concerned.

When at last she shook herself back to a state of full consciousness of reality, Giselle slowly gathered the thin sheets of paper spread over her knees, stared uncomprehendingly at them and then started slowly to re-read them. The first thing she appreciated was that there was no question of gossip, rumour or malice; what she had before her was factual evidence.

She felt she could not blame André for having kept her in the dark. He had always been very reticent on the subject of his bachelor life and, after all, this was much better than to indulge in boasting about his former conquests, thought Giselle. She did, however, blame her sister. Anna could have made a clean breast of everything just in case one day her affair with André did come to light. Such forethought and consideration would only be natural from a sister who had any natural sisterly feelings.

In reasoning thus Giselle was not exactly a brilliant psychologist. She should have known her half-sister better than to expect that one whose real motives and thoughts had always been hidden should suddenly come out into the open and behave like a model of frankness, loyalty and fair play.

The need to act, to do something, got Giselle to her feet; carried her before she had noticed where she was going, down to the bottom of the garden, to the little bosque of jungle vegetation surrounding the stone Buddha and bench on which her husband and sister had sat on the night of the party. She heard the hoarse cawing of the crows wheeling round and round above the palm trees; noticed that it was not yet too hot beneath the shade of the eucalyptus and pepper trees. She observed all kinds of little things as she paced to and fro, but keeping her mind busy with externals did not chase away one gnawing thought: "My own sister used to be my husband's mistress—had three years of romantic week-ends with him by the Eure in Normandy—and now she's staying with us like one of the family, giving herself elder-sister airs, behaving like a little madam whose slightest wish is a command. . ."

Giselle, the meek and gentle, Giselle who always looked to her husband for guidance in everything, felt resentment and rebellion boiling up inside her. The amused remarks of the landlord of *The Three Ducks* and the scene he painted of the two lovers in the arbour, kept flashing vividly through her mind. At last she could bear it no longer and, feeling she had to talk to someone or burst, Giselle went indoors to the telephone. All she said to Linette was to come at once.

Linette turned up in her tropical sun-helmet within

minutes. She divined at once from her friend's face and unusual silence that something was wrong.

"Why, what's the matter, chick?" she asked, "I've never seen you looking so solemn—and tense."

Giselle pointed to the letter spread out on her lap.

"News from France," was all she managed to say.

"What about? Has the government fallen again? The fourth Republic's still safe, isn't it?"

"It's nothing to do with the government!" Giselle told her in a dry, sharp voice that was not hers. "I've told you, haven't I, that I've got a close friend named Madeleine Dollet, who often writes. . .! Well, I've just received a letter from her. It contains news that bowls me right over. . ."

"Oh!"

"Madeleine Dollet has irrefutable proof that before I married André, he and Anna were lovers."

Linette's face showed the greatest shocked astonishment, although privately she had been having vague suspicions.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked.

"Here you are—read for yourself," Giselle told her, handing over the letter.

When the letter was read, she asked:

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"My poor darling! There's no room for doubt, is there?"

"Then you can imagine what a state I've been in this morning!"

Linette thought she had better try to cheer her friend up by putting the best possible construction on the facts now revealed for the first time.



"Look here, Giselle, is there really anything in all this to get so worked up about?" she remonstrated. "What does it all boil down to? Your dear André and Anna had ~~an~~ affair. . . Well, ~~there's~~ nothing in that, nothing, that is, for you to reproach him with. He didn't know you—didn't even know you existed, for I'll bet your sister never said a word to him about you."

"Absolutely! I'm not blaming André in the very least, ~~but~~—her! Look at her! . . ."

"What d'you mean? You expected her, then married to the millionaire Vigneul, to ring you up to congratulate you when she heard about your engagement to André and mention, by the way, that she had already had your beloved one! What a hope! Besides, who would want to throw a cloud over your happiness like that? What would be the point? The affair between Anna and André was over and done with. . . Frankly, if you ask me, neither of them was under any obligation to let you in on their past, especially when they both obviously considered it gone with the wind. . ."

Giselle had listened in silence, with eyes fixed unseeingly in ~~a~~ blank stare. Suddenly she pulled herself together and said:

"I agree with everything you say but that doesn't alter the fact that here and now Anna is coming between my husband and me twenty-four hours a day. . . Do you mean to say that the past can be so very dead to them?"

"You mustn't start imagining things! I've had more experience of these things than you, and I can tell you that there are heaps of people who were once lovers but can meet one another years afterwards with complete indifference. Take my own case—I had a few little

affairs before meeting George, you know! One of them was with an actor of the *Comédie-Française*—handsome as they are made, he was, and his delivery on the stage put Victor Hugo, Lamartine and Alfred de Musset in the nursery rhyme class. We were both madly in love. He'd wait hours for me at the cabaret where I was singing; I'd have walked barefooted to Versailles for the sake of one hour with him. Well, as so often happens, suddenly it all stopped. It was just as if a knife had severed us. He left me without a word—for a sweet seventeen year-old who had gone to him for an audition. We didn't meet again for five years, and meanwhile I had married the doctor. And when suddenly we did meet, my dear, we just shook hands conventionally like a pair of distant relations. I was seeing my fine tragedian with new eyes, and found the past so dead that, that same evening I ate a hearty dinner with my husband. . . I remember, I had a second helping of foie gras! So, you see, a grand passion can flicker out and leave nothing but a little heap of cinders. That's what happens in most cases, I should say."

"Linette, you're a dear! You're trying your best to reassure me. All the same, here I am from morning till night face to face with my husband's former mistress. It's frightful!"

"Not frightful, my sweet, just—amusing! A playwright with a gift for comedy would make something of it!"

"I can tell you I'm not finding it in the least funny! Anna's presence gets on my nerves more and more. The way she's going on makes me sick. She seems to think everyone here should be at her beck and call. She monopolises Lakshmi. If that girl were not so devoted

to me, she would never put up with Anna's interminable whims and impossible demands!"

"Oh, yes, you're right there! She must be a most irritating nuisance, a plague, in fact. The very first day I set eyes on her, I summed her up for the egotistical, spoilt old man's darling that she is. Obviously she has absolutely no thought for anyone but herself, and she thinks she's wonderful. It would give me—and I dare say many other people—great satisfaction to see her flogged, tarred and feathered in public. However, all this does not mean, Giselle, that your sister constitutes a danger to your married life. At least, I don't think so."

Linette looked at her watch and said:

"It's eleven. I must be off to the surgery. It's not worth upsetting yourself, anyway, Giselle. Try to be patient. After all, Anna's not going to stay long with her Dior wardrobe and Cartier-jewels. She'll soon get bored with the scenery round here. D'you know what I think? Your sister'll be married before the end of the monsoon. It'll be a Calcutta or a Bombay multi-millionaire this time!"

"H'm! And meanwhile she's inspecting the tea crop with André at Sylhet!" sighed Giselle.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Man-Eater.*

ANNA had reached the end of her second day in the Indian jungle and enjoyed every moment of it because she had André by her side. The slow journey through the suffocating, humid heat had made her feel like the prisoner of some forest Hydra with a thousand arms, instead of heads, stretching in all directions to paralyse her movements and even her thoughts. At night the mingled cries of jackal, hyena and panther kept her in a state of panic terror and occasionally brought her out in a cold sweat, but all the time she was excitedly happy and would not for anything have missed the chance to taste these new experiences in the company of a man she trusted and who would, she felt, protect her from any danger.

On their first night at Sylhet she had slept in one of the two rooms of the wooden hut on the plantation. Supper had been a frugal meal of canned food and fruit. Before turning in Anna had gone for a little walk with André in a moonlit fairyland. Back at the hut she had no inhibitions about undressing in front of her old lover in the pearly half-light (no artificial light was used for fear of attracting mosquitoes) and lost no time in casting herself into his arms just as if they had

been back at the inn on the banks of the Eure.

"André!" he said softly, "I can't tell you what it means to me to be with you here in this terrifying lovely place, terrifying, at least, to one who has spent her whole life in Paris and never seen anything wilder than the Riviera! . . ."

She was using the familiar French pronoun *tu*, and André found this embarrassing; also her transports of ecstasy, and the fact that she had arranged her camp bed alongside his. He found it regrettable that the effect of her strange surroundings should be to make Anna lose her sense of reality. . .

On the second night they chatted for a while round the camp fire before retiring to their separate, though proximate, couches and mosquito nets. Towards one in the morning André was wakened by a distant roar. There was nothing unusual in the sound, and he would have paid no special attention to it had his overseer not warned him that afternoon of a man-eating tiger which had been seen in the area. It was the same animal, so the man said, that had carried off a coolie's wife not long ago, and it would be better to be on the alert.

The harsh, hungry roar came nearer, amplified by the deep silence of the night. At last Anna could stand it no longer. Naked, as she was, she leapt up out of her sleeping bag, threw off the curtain of her mosquito net and slipped quaking with fear under her neighbour's. The effect was not quite what she hoped. André got up, took his gun and went to the door.

"Oh, André!" she cried, "Please, please don't leave me alone!"

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he calmly assured her, "the fire's still burning. He won't come too near."

"Who won't?"

"The tiger. . . I'll just go and fite a warping round to let him know he'd better keep off."

André went out, leaving Anna with her teeth literally chattering. A tiger loose in the clearing was more than she had bargained for. Suddenly she heard a shot outside, then voices, those of André and his overseer. The tiger had been frightened off, but Anna wasn't to know that. The men's voices grew more distant, for they were examining the tracks of the beast in the undergrowth, from which the overseer concluded the man-eating tiger had turned tail and fled. But Anna wasn't to know that either.

When he had seen his man light two new fires, right and left of the hut, André returned to find Anna prostrate with terror on his bed.

"It's all over," he told her. "You needn't be frightened. Our visitor has taken himself off, and I trust we shall now be able to sleep in peace."

Before he had finished speaking he found Anna in his arms panting and gasping.

"André! André!" she pleaded. "Let me stay here with you! I'll die of fright otherwise. . ."

"Ah-ha! Madame wished for a little adventure in the jungle! Well, Madame is having her wish, eh?" joked André.

His companion put her arms round his neck and clung to him, sobbing like a child. He kissed him and grew hysterical. Had André shared her erotic frenzy—for such it was—it would have been the supreme moment of her life, a moment which for intensity of emotional experience and pure sensual delight she would never have been able to forget.

But her naked body, trembling and expectant, hardly tempted him. He would be sorry, he told himself, to take advantage of such an occasion to rekindle an old flame, not to mention the betrayal of Giselle. As for what he once felt for Anna, that was dead. He pictured the life he would lead at Chandernagor between Giselle and Anna if he gave way now to his sister-in-law's frantic advances.

The first time would only lead to others. . . Anna wouldn't be satisfied with anything short of the passionate transports they used to know in the old days. They'd end up by taking advantage of Giselle's absence every time she went to help at Doctor Ruffec's dispensary. . . a pair of guilty, shameful lovers, trying to hide their secret from the Hindu servants who always see and know everything!

These thoughts were going round in André's head while Anna's arms were going round him on his bed and her hands tried to draw his face towards her so that their lips could meet in the semi-darkness.

It became difficult to find a way out. Suddenly he half sat up, listening.

"Didn't you hear?" he asked.

"Hear what?"

"The sound of footsteps in the dry leaves. I must go and see what it is, and rouse the watchman. . ."

With that he got up quickly, and seized his gun again and went outside. He stayed out whispering to the man till it was almost two o'clock; then came back into the hut on tiptoe. Worn out by emotion Anna had fallen asleep. He threw himself on the other bed and slept too.

"Well, milady!" asked André jauntily next morning over their breakfast of tea, rusks, and mangoes

served by the *kahar*, "how are you after the tremendous emotions of the night?"

Anna was lounging languidly in her pale blue pyjamas, and feeling anything but in the best of form. There were dark circles under her eyes as she yawned and stretched displaying the contours of her finely moulded bust under the thin silk of her pyjama top.

"Darling!" she purred, sipping her tea, "tell me, exactly what happened last night. After the business of the tiger, I can't quite remember. . . I was amazed this morning when I woke up on *your* bed!"

"Poor little Anna! You were so terrified I just couldn't leave you by yourself. . ."

"But—tell me, André, what happened? What did we do? I've got a vague recollection of feeling myself in your arms. Did we. . . Tell me, dearest. . . Did we. . . ? Weren't we. . . ?"

She finished her question with a meaningful side-glance of heavy lidded eyes. André thought he had better put things straight, so, in the most off-hand tone he could command, he said:

"We went to sleep somewhat exhausted by a tiring day. That's all we did, Anna."

She pulled a face of disappointment.

"Is that really *all*?"

"Afraid so. . ."

"Well. . . can't be helped!" she sighed. Then in a tone of voluptuous languor to match her looks, she added pointedly:

"There are lots and lots of other jungle nights and— and quite a variety of tigers!"

That afternoon they went out bird shooting. At six o'clock, when the *kahar* was serving supper they had a



surprise visitor in the person of Richard Burns, a former master of foxhounds and huntsman-in-chief to the maharajah of Cooch Behar, now acting as prospector's prospector in the province of Assam. He was an old acquaintance of André, who had often offered him hospitality in the past. As André now gave his visitor a glass of whisky before supper, and introduced him to Anna, he remarked:

"You're looking rather tired, Richard. Have you had a touch of fever, or what?"

As a matter of fact Burns whose normal appearance at forty-five was that of a great bronzed, blond giant, looked as if he was in the grip of some serious illness. Over supper he threw light on the subject for Anna's benefit. She listened with open-mouthed stupefaction.

"No doubt, Madame," he began, "like most people who know nothing of the jungle, you've always thought the worst dangers were from snakes and wild animals. Well, you can take it from me as an old hand with twenty years of jungle in Burma and Assam behind me, the worst danger in these parts is from leeches—blood-suckers. I've just fallen a victim to them, and not for the first time. In upper Burma near the Yun-Nan frontier the leeches are a menace, a positive danger to the lives of travellers, especially in the rainy season. As you go through the forests, you can't fail to see dozens of these little green insects, and no matter what you do to prevent them they get inside your shorts, under your shirt.

"The really terrible part of it is that you don't feel them until they have been sucking your blood for hours and you realise you're getting faint. That's what has left me in the state you see me in. The only way to get

rid of them is to try to burn them with a lighted cigarette. You probably wouldn't believe it, but it's death to a European to go into some of the Burma valleys not far from here. The leeches, hidden under the thick curtain of hanging vegetation which is running with water, just drop on you as you pass. Your hands, neck, arms, legs are soon covered with the little brutes. If you're already weakened by malaria or dysentery, they finish you off. There's nothing you can do to stop them. They get inside the stoutest leggings, puttees or sleeves. When you're lying in your tent bed at night, they'll get into your ears and nostrils. Your mattress will be covered with blood stains. . .

"Imagine the plight of the poor European who is deserted by his coolies in the middle of this green sea of vegetation! He trudges on, sinking up to the ankles in a thick green morass of rotting leaves swarming with myriads of these vermin. I wouldn't wish my worst enemy to fall a victim of these blood-suckers!"

Anna shuddered and suddenly found the bare hut very comfortable, with its one miserable tiger intruder who made shift with the smell of the human flesh and blood he coveted. . .

After supper the *kahar* rekindled the wood fires and André made Burns drink a third whisky to help him forget his troubles. The conversation turned to the state of India since the cessation of British rule, a subject in which Anna was very interested.

"Ah, Mrs. Pelissier, you would hardly believe it, but the ones who have suffered the most under the new regime are the Indian princes. Before the departure of the British Viceroy there were 562 maharajahs, nawabs, gackwars, nizams and other princes who have been

deprived of a considerable part of their power and revenues by the shaking off of British rule. Here's an example. Take His Highness Saramad-i-Rajahai Hindustan Raj Rajendra Shri Maharajahdirai Sir Sawai Man Singh Bahadur. . . That's the complete title of the Maharajah of Jaipore who claims descent from the Sun God. Pandit Nehru's ascent to power in 1907 cost him the loss of his temple of gold and silver, a fort filled with jewels of every description, all but one of his palaces and three-quarters of his personal fortune. His poor Highness used to own two hundred elephants; all were taken but a bare dozen. Yet he's not one of the worst off, because, owing to the fact that he approved the independence of India he was made Governor General with a salary of eighteen million rupees a year, or approximately 810 million French francs. With that His Highness ought to be able to make ends meet!"

On the fourth day André and Anna set out on the return journey to Chandernagor. In the buffalo cart from the estate to Sylhet, André said:

"Well, Anna, how did you like your little escapade into the jungle? Not too bad, eh?"

"It's been marvellous! You've really spoiled me. . . a man-eating tiger in the middle of the night. There I was expecting to see the striped coat of the tawny beast right inside the hut at any moment. Why it was *Grand-Guignol* in real life! Thank you again darling for having brought me."

"Oh, by the way, Anna" said André in a matter-of-fact voice, "now that we are returning to civilisation, it would be better if you stopped tutting me. You've been 'thou-ing' me now for four days, you know!"

Anna sighed.

"I know—no more 'darning' and no more—anything. Conventional formality as befits in-laws must be resumed for the sake of appearances."

André made a vague sort of gesture to convey the idea of resignation and inevitability.

"It's fate! What is to be, will be, and what is done, is done," he said with finality.

"Which means that we have to submit to a lot of ridiculous play-acting, nonsense, and absolute hypocrisy! Well, for the moment only, we'll put up with it."

André did not press the point. This concession was as much as he could expect from Anna at present, even if he didn't much care for her reservation clause, "for the moment".

## CHAPTER IV

*'If you love me, I fear nothing!'*

FOR the sake of company Giselle invited Dr. Ruffec and Linette to lunch with her the day after she had confided in Linette the contents of her letter from Paris. On the way home after lunch Linette said to her husband:

"That poor girl has had a frightful blow! Frankly, I think it would have been kinder not to have sent her the revelations from France."

Ruffec had a clear, logical way of looking at things and for the moment was not prepared to commit himself one way or the other.

"For two people who have once been in love and no longer are, the past doesn't matter. In the case of this pair, they made a complete break, she to marry money, he to marry for love. . . What we need to know now is Madame Vigneul's real motive in coming here. Was she bored on her own in Paris and came out to India for distraction? If that is so, then it would certainly have been better for Giselle's friend to have kept what she knew to herself. If, on the other hand, Anna's motive in coming here was to rekindle an old flame which, as far as she is concerned never went out, then things are just a bit tricky, and

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it's far better for Giselle to have been warned."

"All the same, George, Giselle has no means of knowing whether her sister is out for a flirtation for no better reason than that it's her nature, or is up to some dirty trick. . ."

"What about André? Can she trust him?"

"Oh, absolutely!"

"You think so, too?"

"Yes, I do. I think André is a fine woman man and that Anna's wasting her time. And the pity of it is that Giselle is being made to suffer. Just put yourself in her place for a moment. Her sister goes off suddenly with André to Sylhet. She has four days on her own in which to imagine the very worst, no matter how hard she tries to take a calm and reasonable view of it all. What I most dislike is to hear her say, as she did to me just now without mincing her words, that she is beginning to hate her sister and regard her as a mortal enemy. In fact, she admitted solemnly as if she were confessing to a priest, she is beginning to hope something—some misfortune—will happen to Anna!"

"Oh! Has she ever confided her feelings to André?"

"She says she has and that he told her he didn't at all like Anna's extra affectionate little attentions towards him, but didn't see how they could very well say to her; 'Look here, we've had enough of you—scram!'"

"Well, there's something in that. . . By the way how's his business doing now?"

"Badly, I'm afraid. Giselle's getting worried about that, too, so, as we're such close friends I said outright: 'Look here, André is in a fix financially and you have a multi-millionaire widow's sister staying with you. If she really has the welfare of you two at heart, she could

take the opportunity to show it in some tangible way, couldn't she? Why don't you ask her for a loan to tide André over? She could have a good rate of interest—rich people are always fond of the money bags, you know.' You should have seen the look on Giselle's face! You'd imagine I had proposed robbing the Mint, or something! Then with scorn in her voice she said: 'Can you see me going to Anna for help? What humiliation! My sister plays me up, defies me under my nose with my husband, give me to understand that I'm a little fool, that he doesn't love me, but is merely tolerating me out of pity. . . . And now you suggest that I should go on my knees to her asking for her help! Never, never, I tell you! Maybe you thought I was exaggerating when I said I ~~Ma~~ <sup>Mad</sup> her? I assure you it's so true it's driving me mad!' hat. Naturally, after that outburst, George," concluded

"I," "I dropped the subject."

Linnet then do the traveller's return?"

"Well, evening,"

"Then, well, we shall see! . . ."

"Ah,

\* \* \*

And André got back at 8 p.m., after being Anna home from Calcutta where the Pelissiers' chauffeur picked them up at the airport. Giselle had decided if she knew nothing and feared nothing. Her to act as welcome was just as she would have had if they smile often returning from an afternoon's ramble in the had busy. At dinner she made a show of special interest about what Anna thought of all she had seen and heard. in well, Anna, how you've really seen the jungle!" she exclaimed. "Just think how you will be able to boast about your adventures to your smart friends from Palm Beach!"

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"André spoiled me. He even laid on a man-eating tiger!"

Anna exaggerated the tiger incident till it appeared the beast had been right under the window of their hut and then within sniffing distance of her mosquito net. As for Richard Burns' story of the blood-sucking leeches, it had given her nightmares which she related in detail, obviously enjoying herself as she did so.

"So, what with one thing and another you had a wonderful time?" commented Giselle.

"Oh—terrific. I forgot to say, Giselle, I'm sorry I rushed off like that without letting you know. . ."

"Nonsense! That's quite all right. Nothing is more natural than that you'd want to take the opportunity to go and look at a tea garden."

Being tired after the journey, Anna went to bed very early. Alone with his wife André, who had absolutely nothing on his conscience, felt awkward and almost guilty. He saw again the scene in the hut at Sylhet on the night of the tiger incident; saw Anna naked and trembling, desperately clinging to him—and wondered whether his thoughts showed on his face. To avoid discussing Sylhet with his wife, he turned the conversation to what had been happening in his absence.

"No one particular rang up?"

"Yes, the director of Bradford's."

"What did he want?"

"To remind you about the Bill for 75,000 rupees they've already put off twice."

"I know! I know! Another of them! Giselle, my pet, do you believe in miracles?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Well, the truth is we need a packet of miracles to



pull us out of our present mess. Bradford's are only a drop in the ocean. I could come to some arrangement with them, but Malouk. . .!"

"What are we to do?"

"I haven't an idea, and I'm completely at his mercy. In forty-eight hours he can say to me: 'Pelissier, all your property's mine!' And unless he is less of a mean, crafty old hound than I imagine, he'll rub in his triumph by offering me a job as foreman on my own estate at Sylhet! I can just hear the slipshod old brute say: 'Pelissier, I'm not hard-hearted! Don't worry! You can work for me as a foreman at Sylhet!'"

"It's frightful!" exclaimed Giselle, "Whatever are we to do?"

André shrugged his shoulders. "Giselle dear, I tell you I feel like a mountaineer clinging to the last bit of ledge between him and the bottom of a precipice!"

With that he strode off into his office to look over the papers on his desk. Giselle followed. After an uneasy silence she asked in an edgy voice:

"What are you looking at there?"

"I'm going over my accounts once more. . ."

"Have you spoken about all this to Anna?"

"Yes, I have mentioned it."

"But does she really know the state we're in?"

"I didn't attempt to hide anything from her."

"And what does she think about it?"

"She's very shrewd. I suppose she could hardly be otherwise after being married to an exchange agent. I can tell you she knows what's what."

"Well, did she think we had a chance?"

"Not the slightest."

"And—didn't she say anything else?"

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"To-day on the way back here, she said for the first time 'André, we must have a talk about your predicament, because to put it mildly, I think you're riding for a fall.' "

"And what did you say?"

"What d'you think? I tried to appear as nonchalant as I could, said I'd often had these ups and downs before and would, no doubt, find some way out of my difficulties this time at the last moment. .

"Do you really think you will find some last minute way out?"

"No."

Suddenly, with the finality of that "No", Giselle found her eyes brimming over with tears. André jumped up from his desk to comfort her.

"Poor kid! I can't bear to see you upset like this. You mustn't cry over the hopeless mess I'm in, Giselle. I'm not blind or lame. We'll manage, somehow, to get on our feet again. . . Cheer up sweetheart!"

He kissed her throat and held her tight in his arms. Between strangled sobs Giselle stammered in the broken voice of a frightened child:

"Yes, of course. . . of course, we'll be all right. Provided only you love me, I'm not afraid of anything."

## CHAPTER V

### *Don Juan of the Jungle*

ON the following day, November 29, André was at work in his office at four o'clock in the afternoon, poring over his accounts, his bills, and over-drafts and seeing not the slightest ray of hope, despite the air of false optimism he tried to assume in front of his wife. Every hope of help had faded; he had tried to raise fresh loans; he had searched in vain all over Calcutta for investors willing to come to his aid at the last minute.

His spirits were at their lowest ebb, and he was glad that both Giselle and Anna were out, Giselle helping Linette at the clinic, Anna calling on the MacPhersons. As a matter of fact, Anna had come back and was taking a siesta in her room, but he didn't know that.

In the midst of his sombre meditations André looked up and saw his *chaprassi*. The man had entered the room silently to announce the arrival of a visitor—Malouk.

"Show him in," said André.

Malouk appeared, smoking an enormous cigar.

"Hello, Pelissier! I'm not troubling you, I hope?" he asked, putting his sun helmet on the nearest piece of furniture, and beginning to lower himself into an arm-chair.

"Not in the least," replied André politely.

"If you're busy, or it's not convenient," continued his visitor, "we might just as well postpone our talk till next month."

"No, no. Do sit down, Malouk."

The armchair creaked as Malouk finished lowering himself into it. He sat for a moment or two in silence surveying his victim in much the same way as a cat watches a mouse before making the final pounce. Then, turning his cigar round and round between his fingers, he began:

"As you're my debtor, it would have been more fitting for me to have summoned you to my office; but I've got to be away next week and before I go I want to get certain things put in order between us."

"Carry on; I'm listening," said André.

"No, I'm waiting to hear what you've got to say first."

Making an effort to treat the whole thing lightly, André tried a pleasantry.

"Fine! Then, if we both go on waiting for the other to talk, we'll still be at the same spot this time next week!"

"Well—talk."

"You talk."

"Oh, I've got nothing to say, except to ask you whether you are in a position to discharge your obligations within the next forty-eight hours. Is it yes or no?"

"No."

"Right, then this is how you stand. I've got your three letters of credit for 80,000 rupees against the loan I advanced you in consideration of material supplied by

the Thomson Graham Company whose various invoices F.O.B. total that sum. Then there is the contract signed by you in which you undertake to pay me back 140,000 rupees from the harvest of your crop on the 30th of this month. Next the interest on my loans made to you since the 1st February, 1903 at 12 per cent. comes to 180,000 rupees. The mortgage on your Kalwar plantations. . .”

André made a gesture of astonishment,

“What are you talking about? Mr. Rajaram Saksena gave me that mortgage!”

“It was Mr. Saksena; but he thought it wise to get rid of it, and turn it over to me. You still owe him the interest at 12 per cent. which comes to 75,000 rupees. On the 30th of November, that is, to-morrow, you will owe me Mr. Saksena’s 12 per cent, plus the 12 per cent. for the coming year which make 150,000 rupees. You can see and check for yourself. . .”

André had no need. He had been haunted by these accursed figures for weeks. He simply said in a resigned voice: “It’s all correct.”

“We’re agreed, then?” asked Malouk.

“Yes.”

“Very well, then. Putting these various sums together, we get the round sum of 710,000 rupees falling due from you to me to-morrow, November 30. Agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to liquidate the lot to-morrow?”

André lit a cigar to give himself courage and then said:

“Tomorrow I shall be able to pay you 5,000—not an *anna* more!”

“And the balance?”

“5,000 a month.”

"Which means you would discharge your debt in nine years or so!"

"I'm sorry, it's the best I can offer at the moment."

"You're taking a rise out of me!"

"I have no means of doing better, Malouk."

"Is that your last word?"

"It is."

Malouk stood up and started pacing the room like some big animal in a cage. His great hairy legs bulging out of his shorts moved ponderously to and fro, the floor creaking at every step. After a few moments of this exercise he spoke.

"In view of your attitude, Pelissier, and the total lack of goodwill and co-operation you now plainly show, I have no alternative but to distrain on your property."

"I hardly expected less from the kindness of your heart!"

"This is no time for joking, I assure you. It won't be out of the kindness of my heart that I'll have to pay Thomson Graham, Saksena and the rest of your creditors, that I've already been holding in check with my own money. . ."

"Do you know Malouk, there's one thing in all this that's a consolation to me? It's knowing that a fat bird like you will lose a few feathers too! I find that a jolly prospect! However, to come back to the point—how would you like me served up? I can see on your splendid countenance the pleasurable anticipation of the feast. You may as well decide on the details of the sauce round the dish. . ."

"Stop acting the fool, Pelissier. You know very well that no matter where you went you wouldn't get any fairer treatment than I'm giving you. It isn't as if you

deserved any better, either. I haven't forgotten the way you tried to pull a fast one over me when you first came here—over the Jaintiapur plantation that I had wanted for some time. That was very clever, wasn't it? Well, it's my turn to laugh now!"

"By Jove, Malouk, the sharks in the Bay of Bengal are sprats compared to you!"

"Sarcasm won't get you anywhere, my boy. And I may as well inform you that the treatment I've received here in this house doesn't encourage me to play the philanthropist for your sweet sake either!"

"You have always been well received under my roof!"

"Oh, sure—as the friend of the family to be haughtily rebuffed by you, silly little wife who gives herself condescending airs that don't become her!"

"You richly deserved what you got after that offensive way you spoke to her."

"And that fine boulevard show-piece, your sister-in-law, I suppose she had every right to smack me in the face, had she?"

At this André saw red. Before Malouk had time to draw another breath, his bankrupt victim had hurled himself on him from behind his desk. André's blood was up. He knew only one thing: that he wanted to give Malouk's detestable hulking carcass the good hiding he so richly deserved. Blind rage gave André the strength of three men. Despite Malouk's bulk and weight, he seized him by the lapels and lifted him off the floor, shaking him like a sack of potatoes.

"I'll make you eat your words, you dirty old pimp!" he cried.

Malouk was afraid of his frenzied debtor who dared

to treat him with such violence, yet he could not restrain himself from more insults.

"As you fly so quickly to the defence of that tart, your sister-in-law, I suppose you must have had her yourself some time, and sent her packing. . ."

André had to make a supreme effort to control himself, or he would have strangled Malouk on the spot. With hands tightening round the flabby bull neck in front of him he hissed:

"My sister-in-law means nothing to me, but if you spread your filthy libellous stories any further, you'll get such a thrashing it will take three weeks at Dr. Ruffec's clinic to mend you!"

Struggling in the vice-grip of the hands around his neck, Malouk choked and panted out:

"Listen to the pauper knight errant! Your heroics look pretty suspicious to me!"

"Get out! Get out at once!" shouted André, slackening his grip on the bull neck only to land his guest a blow in the face which would give him a black eye for a week. Then as a parting shot the enraged André twirled Malouk round and accelerated his exit with a well-aimed kick in the seat of his shorts.

"Out of my sight!" he yelled, "you dirty crook and menace to decent women!"

The humiliated Malouk's rage knew no bounds, but he dared not risk provoking an upper-cut to the chin and getting laid out on the floor. Reaching for his helmet and staggering towards the door, he roared:

"You'll pay for this, Pelissier! You've put the seal on your final ruin!"

With that Malouk stumbled down the verandah steps and André turned to help himself to a whisky to



steady his nerves. He knew only too well, he told himself, that this scene would be the end of everything—total bankruptcy, the loss of his tea gardens, seizure of his house and furniture. He noticed that the armchair had been upset in the altercation and put it right as he paced the room trying to regain composure.

After a few minutes, he heard a gentle tapping on the door that led into the passage, yet was so preoccupied he did not fully register its significance—that someone wanted to come in. Only when the tapping persisted more loudly did he call out "Who's there?"

There was no answer. The door opened and Anna came softly in, holding with one hand the folds of the flimsy *eau de Nil négligée* she had hastily donned as the sounds of the violent quarrel had reached their climax.

"What's the matter, André?" she asked, a look of alarm on her face.

He didn't answer, but there was a world of meaning in the sombre, hopeless expression of his face and the shrug of his hunched shoulders.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?" asked Anna advancing further into the room.

"Oh, no. It was Malouk, that's all," André told her.

"Ah! The Don Juan of the Jungle!"

"Your admirer!" countered André with a sad little smile.

"That fellow's a constant nuisance, isn't he? Always some little thing or other. . ."

"Little things which have blown up larger than life," remarked André darkly, still pacing up and down, with brows knitted and shoulders hunched.

Anna sat in the armchair and her face grew serious as she watched him.

"André, let's talk frankly," she urged gently. "Ever since I've been here I've been aware that all was not well, but didn't care to talk about it for the fear of being tactless. You yourself have hardly said a word about the troubles on your mind. . . . The time for beating about the bush is over. Let's have it out!"

"What's the good! Anna dear, all these complicated business affairs have nothing to do with a pretty creature like you!"

"That's where you're mistaken, especially when the woman in question has your affairs very much at heart. Besides—I was the director's secretary at the Mining Research Company and simply had to master the ins and outs of things in the business world. . . . Come on, André, in the name of everything that once brought us together, tell me the truth, the whole truth!" . . .

"Oh, that's easy enough. In forty-eight hours Malouk's going to make a bankrupt of me. It will mean the confiscation of all my property."

"I've heard it said *sub rosa* that in French money you owe him some ten million francs altogether."

"Yes. I have either to hand him over a little more than 10,000,000 francs, or—go under: take a job as a barman in Firpo's at Calcutta, or as a rep. travelling Pakistan for electric light bulbs. Start all over again at forty, in fact!"

"André, it must not happen!"

"It is happening, though, and without further notice!"

"No, it can't!"

André waved a nervous hand in protest, pulled a chair up to where Anna was sitting and sat down beside her.

"Ah, Anna, dear, your optimism is wonderful! But, believe me, the Bengal forests are not a fairyland!" he exclaimed, tapping her forearm gently with his fingers to emphasise his words.

"There, again, you're mistaken," said Anna calmly. She caught his hand and held it between hers, before continuing in a lowered voice:

"You have only to say the word for a good fairy to wave a magic wand and cause all your troubles to disappear!"

"Anna, my dear Anna, here's all the difference in the world between imagination, or wishful thinking, and reality!"

Anna dropped her voice still lower and murmured:

"I would be your good fairy! I would make your troubles vanish with a wave of a magic wand worth ten million francs!"

This point-blank offer came as a sudden shock to André. He withdrew his hand from Anna's grasp and in his confusion mumbled something that sounded like: "You can't mean that seriously."

"I do most seriously. Words, platonic declarations are no good when it comes to proving one's love for someone. The proof must take practical shape. In my case it would be this little gift which I am ready and willing to make."

André felt his head begin to swim, but his distracted mind saw clearly that Anna's magnanimous offer would not be without conditions. He had a sudden intuition of what those conditions might be, and tried to hold them off with a bluff of counter-propositions.

"Anna—I don't know what to say, I am so deeply touched," he began, "Words fail me, but one thing is

certain, and that is that if you did come to my rescue in this manner, I should make you my business partner, and I would see that you had a privileged place among the shareholders. . .”

“That’s not the kind of partnership I want!” announced Anna shortly. “The place I want is not in your business but in your heart!”

She turned on him a gaze of such intensity that it seemed the whole of her will was in her great shining eyes, trying to paralyze his will and force him to surrender. Her eyes had the same lustre as in the hut at Sylhet. Hungry desire emanated from every pore of her body and was betrayed by a faint trembling of her limbs, although, now, there was no tiger.

Playing for time, André countered diplomatically:

“But, Anna dear, you know you’ve always got a place in my heart. . .”

“Fiddlesticks to your old tea dividends!” she spat out savagely. “What I want is you. I want to get you back. You’re not blind, André—can’t you see that I still love you? That I only came out here to relive old times with you. I did once think my marriage to Vigneul had cured me of you just as one gets over an illness; but after a few years of it I found memory, the memory of you, crowding back and taking possession of me like a relapse of fever. It was a cherished secret that made me miserable and happy at the same time. I used to spend hours alone in the darkness of the night watching my private memory film of the things we did together. All the silly little details—childish things, lovely things—our gambols in the country—everything we did, and said and felt, passed before my closed eyes. In the last year of my poor husband’s life, although I tended him

with scrupulous devotion, I couldn't help feeling guilty and ashamed of my habit of retiring to my private 'cinema' night after night! Even in the day time I couldn't put you out of my thoughts. While I was looking after Vigneul, I could see you there in the room beside me. I could feel the touch of your hands; of your lips on the nape of my neck giving me . . . of your surprise kisses just as you used to when you crept up behind me in my room in Montparnasse. It was so real and convincing, this game of make-believe I played with myself, that I used to hold my breath for fear of disturbing your shadow. . . And yet all the time you were away on the other side of the world!"

The flood of words was poured out in a tense, harsh strained voice, André listened with a growing paralysed apprehension. Unable to move, rooted to the spot, frozen, mute with the horrifying shock of this new crisis.

"André! I love you more than ever!"

Anna was speaking again. She had seized his two hands, was drawing him towards her. She was calling him *tu* again.

"Listen, *cheri*, listen! With my help you'll come out on top again. . . I'll give you everything I possess! Everything! You understand? You'll have your revenge on your awful rival, on that horrible Malouk. It will be a brilliant revenge, too. Between us we'll finish him off completely! He won't stand a chance. . . You will be one of the leading men in Bengal. . . All I ask in exchange for what I'll do for you is that you devote yourself entirely and exclusively to the woman who held out a helping hand to you in your hour of dire need."

Overwhelmed and dumbfounded André echoed:

"Devote myself entirely to you?"

"Wouldn't it be only natural?"

"But. . . but. . . —er, what about Giselle?"

"You'd have a separation! . . . Oh, and I'd treat her handsomely. You needn't think I'm hard or vindictive towards my sister. No, I'd gladly settle on her a substantial sum by way of compensation, not the miserable pittance that the courts allow as alimony; but a worthwhile income that would give her a comfortable life."

"You mean, you're asking me to sacrifice Giselle in order to settle with Malouk?"

"André! I've never loved anyone but you. Our love was too splendid a thing to allow it to be broken for ever by something that came between us temporarily."

"You can call your marriage with your late husband 'something that came between us temporarily' if you like; but I don't look upon my marriage to your sister in that light. My love for her grows with the years. I've told you what she has been to me since we've settled here—a nurse, a gay companion, an understanding friend in trouble, everything a man could wish—and then you suggest I reward her by telling her I've no further use for her! Not for all the gold in the world would I ever dream of doing such a thing!"

"You prefer bankruptcy and ruin?"

"To enrich myself at the price of such a despicable, low, cowardly action, would mean living for ever in the misery of self-reproach."

Anna flung herself against André again and held him tightly in her arms.

"What is to become of me then?"

"My poor, foolish Anna, you are very rich, you have everything you need to be happy."

"Except you! For me happiness is to be with you!"

"I beg of you, Anna, please realise. . ."

"But I love you André! . . ."

"All the same, you haven't come here just to break up my home, have you? Can't you see that I could not be happy if I sold myself to you! I'm not for sale!"

Neither of them noticed that the door of the room had opened softly, and Giselle stood there behind them. She had heard the last few words of their passionate exchanges.

"For sale? How much?" she repeated dryly as she came forward.

Anna and her husband stared at her in dismay for a moment then remembered to disentangle each other as Anna answered sharply:

"Ten million francs, if you want to know!"

Giselle took a step towards her sister and asked:

"That's the amount you offered my husband to get rid of me?"

Anna didn't feel like playing a subordinate role in this, and decided on a few histrionics.

"You little imbecile! Come down to earth will you?" she stormed. "Don't you know destitution stares you in the face? Don't you know you've got no home—that you're as good as out in the street now? That's what's coming to you, and I've offered to save you!"

"Thank you. You are kind and generous."

"Besides, you haven't been left out. You'll have your share, but on one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you clear out."

Giselle stiffened and looked over at André. Without waiting for her to speak he said quickly:

"Anna already knows my reply to her offer. It's 'no'."

"I knew it! . . . André, leave us alone for a moment, will you?"

He hesitated, then got up and went out of the room, leaving the sisters face to face, appraising each other like two mortal enemies before battle.

Giselle opened the attack.

"I guessed your arrival here would do no good. Apparently you had made up your mind that with your money you'd easily smash up our marriage."

"You forget that I had your husband before you! That we were madly in love. . ."

"I know all that! I've been told quite recently about your idyllic escapades in the past when you played at bashful rustic lovers at the Three Ducks Inn. And you loved him so much you had to go and marry a rich man. Vigneul is dead, but his money remains. . . in your hands. What an example of a great love! Dear me! Are you really surprised that André prefers poverty to you and your millions? Keep them for yourself and the gigolos who may be able to be bought with them!"

Anna was stung by these taunts. She wasn't accustomed to swallowing home truths about herself meekly.

"You deserve. . ." she burst out.

"I deserve what?" interrupted Giselle. "Not to say 'Thank you' to you for coming here to steal my husband. I've always suspected you of being as dishonest as you are calculating. I had plenty of instances of both in the past; but I never dreamt you'd carry cynicism to such an extreme. Things have now got to such a pass,



there's only one course left for you to take."

"And what's that, may I ask?"

"Go away."

Anna gave a forced, bitter laugh:

"So! I'm being turned out, am I?"

"Yes, that's the way to deal with a cheat-thief like you!"

"You will be sorry for your insulting language, I can tell you. I'll make you pay dearly for it!"

"One last word. The Air-France plane leaves the day after tomorrow at 12 noon. I advise you to tell everybody you've been suddenly called back to Paris. You can even pretend to be broken-hearted at leaving us. That'll be quite a good line to take for face-saving. ."

"Thank you for your advice!"

"It will give you one last chance to put on the happy family big-sister act. . ."

Anna was about to say something, then apparently changed her mind and, instead, darted swiftly towards the door.

"Where you going?" asked Giselle.

Anna swung round in the doorway, a look of intense hatred on her face.

"I'm going to pack my bags—like a servant who's been sacked!"

## CHAPTER VI

### *Surprise Party*

**N**ext day the Peñssier Household was as if nothing had happened; but it was the calm before a storm.

André was out on business most of the day. Anna had not been seen since 11 a.m. Giselle awoke late after a sleepless night and rang for Lakshmi.

"Is Madame Vigneul still in her room?" she asked.

"No, merz sahib, Madame get up early, finish packing trunks in great hurry, say all the time 'Lakshmi be quick! Be quick! I have not much more time here!' So Lakshmi make great ado for finish trunks to get Madame away!"

"You seem very pleased about it Lakshmi. Are you glad Madame Vigneul's going back to France?"

"Oh, merz sahib! Lakshmi make, you know— whoopee! So glad, so happy when Madame Vigneul go!"

"But why, Lakshmi?"

"Oh, I no like your sister. . . I listen when she speak. I see how she look. Not good! Her eyes look at *you*, merz sahib, like viper! I may say what Lakshmi see, yes?"

"Yes, tell me."

Lakshmi dropped her voice to a whisper and said solemnly:

"Madame Vigneul—worse than viper! Very bad woman!"

"Oh, Lakshmi! You mustn't say such things. Why are you so hard on my sister?"

Lakshmi shook her head with a very knowing air and declared:

"I know, I see! . . . Lakshmi has eyes in the back of her head! Madame Vigneul, she try play love and kiss with Monsieur when memsahib go out."

Giselle thought it better not to pursue that subject, and asked casually:

"Where she gone, do you know?"

"She no say where but . . . Madame Vigneul, she go to dispensary. She say to me that she have very bad headache and no sleep last night and must get aspirin. After get aspirin she say she go have talkie talkie with memsahib MacPherson in 'American' house."

"All right. You can go now Lakshmi. I want to rest a little longer. I'm very tired."

"You like that I work the fan while you doze?"

"That's very sweet of you, 'Lakshmi, but I'd rather you wash and ironed my pink slip."

At one o'clock André came back, and awoke Giselle, who had fallen asleep. He looked worried.

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

"Lakshmi told me she had gone to the dispensary for some aspirin. After last night's scene, it appears, she didn't sleep a wink—which is hardly surprising—and this morning she had a headache. After the dispensary she was going on to the MacPhersons'."

"Oh! So she's avoiding us!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if she went and called on Malouk, too."

"Huh! That would be just likely after the way she's treated him! Two enemies do sometimes join forces against a third, but not in a case like this. What do you suppose she could plot with Malouk? If she thought there was the slightest hope of a peaceful settlement between him and me, then she could go and try to upset it; but, as a matter of fact, she knows Malouk is out for my blood already without any encouragement from her. . ."

André sat on Giselle's bed, still looking anything but happy.

"Last night, after the scene, you were in such a state of exhaustion I didn't like to wear you out more, so I had to pocket my curiosity about your little chat with your sister. How did it go off?"

"She went off in a fury—on the warpath, but not open warfare. You ought to know that she is capable of a sort of cold fury that bodes no good."

"At this stage in the battle there's nothing she can do to injure either you or me."

"André, I know it was wrong of me to lose my temper with her. I shouldn't have done it. I've been thinking over everything this morning, and—I wish I hadn't done it. I'm full of remorse!"

"Remorse? You're daft!"

"Yes, Yes! After all, I see now—I'm the cause of the catastrophe that's fallen on you. At least if I'm not the cause, I'm an obstacle in your path. . ."

"Whatever are you bethinking about, darling?"

"Well, don't you see? But for me—if I wasn't in your life—if I'd never come into it—you would have a wonderful chance to get out of your difficulties at the last moment. Yes, André, it's no use pretending not to

see the facts as they are—I'm just a millstone tied round your neck, a paralysing burden. . ."

André leaned over the bed and took Giselle tenderly in his arms. He tried to keep his words light.

"Come! Come! Have a heart, Giselle! What on earth's the matter with you?"

"I'm just talking sound commonsense. If only I'd had the courage, it was I who should have cleared out. Instead of indulging my indignation as a wife betrayed by her sister, it would have been far better for me to have realised that I'm no good to you—That I'm merely leading you on to your doom."

"You're crazy, my pet! You must have got a touch of the sun. How do you dare to talk such rubbish? What do you suppose would have happened to me alone here without you? Without the great solace of your moral support every moment of my life? Giselle, darling, what if we do find ourselves on the rocks to-morrow? We'll make a new start together, you and I, hand in hand, and everything will be all right!"

"André, how wonderful you are! I do love you!"

Deeply touched by her husband's words, Giselle caught his face between her hands and covered it with passionate kisses. When at last she paused, she exclaimed in vibrant tones:

"And how I admire your pluck! You won't be beaten!"

"Don't you worry, Giselle! I'm already looking for a job. The bankruptcy proceedings should take about three months. I'll easily have found a job before then.

"This will help to hold us!" said Giselle pointing to her diamond ring.

"Stop worrying, pet! You'll have a much bigger

diamond than that which things brighten up!"

At eight that evening André and Giselle were having dinner on their own, more nonplussed than ever by the continued absence of Anna. She couldn't, they figured, have left already without telling them, because her trunks were still there.

Suddenly, in the midst of their uneasy discussion of her behaviour, they heard voices in the garden. André went to the front porch and found Dr. Ruffec, Linette and Anna, the doctor carrying a case of bottles, the women boxes and parcels as for a picnic. They all had a festive air.

"André! Giselle!" shouted Linette, "You're being invaded!"

Ruffec set about taking out his bottles and explained.

"Don't be alarmed, my good friends. We've brought our own ammunition. Madame Vigneul had an idea. She came to tell us about her sudden recall to France. Then, as she thought her last evening at home with you would be a sad affair, she suggested we made a surprise party of it."

André and Giselle were at a loss to understand this new move of Anna's, but Giselle hastened to bid her guests welcome and help with the party fare.

Anna was at the very top of her form.

"Oh, Giselle!" she exclaimed, "I simply had to do something to brighten up my last evening with you, so I thought we'd baptise it in champagne. We've invited the MacPhersons. They'll be along presently."

Then with irony a little overdone Anna added:

"I kept telling myself, André and Giselle would be so sad to see me go tomorrow and that, after their wonder-

ful hospitality, I ought to do something about it."

"That's the idea! The more the merrier! You, André and Giselle alone couldn't very well get drunk on your own!" said Linette.

"I hope this does not mean you're making a final farewell to India, Madame Vigneul?" asked Dr. Ruffec as he uncorked a bottle of whisky.

"Oh, no! I'm just beginning to appreciate the charm of the place. Thanks to André, I'm even developing a taste for the jungle. And, remember the fat lizard that scared me in my room on my first day here?—Well, I don't mind it a bit now! I treat it as a pet!

Giselle, who was helping Linette with the food, found an opportunity to whisper in her husband's ear:

"What's come over her, my beautiful sister?"

"She's probably decided this is the best line to take. It's better, anyway, than weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Lakshmi, filled with curiosity about the goings-on, had glided into the room as lightly as the shadow of a ballet dancer. She was promptly requisitioned to help arrange all the good things to eat.

Hardly had she stood in front of them exclaiming: "Ugh! Big whoopee-feast to-night!" than Giselle gave her another job.

"When you've finished that, Lakshmi, go and get us some iced fresh lemon squashes. There's a good girl!" said Giselle.

Meanwhile Anna stood on the verandah, and with her carefully tended hands lightly grasping the balustrade, gazed spellbound at the trees at the bottom of the garden.

"Just look at the forest in this moonlight, doctor,"

she exclaimed to Ruffec, who was standing there with her. "It's enchanting! It's fantastic! Listen to the bird calls! The cries of the unseen animals—all the strange sounds that at first are so terrifying, but soon become so familiar! . . ."

"Ah! You see, you'll miss all this when you're back in the *Place de l'Opéra*!"

Indoors Linette went up to Giselle and whispered:

"Well, I wouldn't have believed it! Your dear sister improves on acquaintance, doesn't she? She's never been in such good form before!"

"I can't make head or tail of it, Linette. Just between ourselves, I had a terrible row with her last night!"

"There's certainly no sign of it now."

"We haven't spoken since! She gave me a look fit to kill me dead, and went to her room. There all day to-day she just disappeared."

"Disappeared? What'd you mean?"

"She who normally gets up very late, was off out before eleven this morning. We were wondering what had happened to her, and were beginning to get anxious. We telephoned your house, but there was no reply."

"George and I had to go on a medical inspection to Dum-Dum."

"When did Anna turn up at your place?"

"Not long ago. We had hardly finished dinner when she suddenly appeared at the other end of the avenue of palms. George dashed out thinking there must have been an accident. But there was Anna as calm as you please, smiling as if she hadn't a care in the world. She came to announce her departure and surprise party, explaining that she had received a cable from France



where she was urgently needed for important business. Naturally the farewell party seemed a good idea to George and me."

"Linette, give me your word of honour that you will not reveal to anyone what I'm going to tell you."

"Certainly, I give you my word, Giselle. You know I can keep a secret."

Giselle lowered her voice and said:

"You've no idea how queer this stunt of Anna's is! In reality, she's not going of her own free will, but because she's been told to go! I told her. . . when I discovered that she was offering André money to divorce me! That was the scene last night. I gave her till to-morrow to clear out."

"And she turns up now all smiles! Do you think she really means to catch that plane?"

"Her things are all packed, that's all I know!"

"But she may not be going straight back to Paris. She could break her journey somewhere in India. Who knows?"

"My dear Linette! What a question!"

"I'm afraid I can't see into the future, but you have to be prepared for anything when dealing with underhand clever people. One thing is certain, and that is that's she's madly in love with your husband. You've won the first round, but she could have something up her sleeve for the second. She's probably thinking 'My first attempt has failed, but André has yet to experience what's coming to him, and he may decide, after all, that it's wiser not to disdain my money.' She's willing to wait. She's probably telling herself: 'In time he'll be mine.'"

"Linette, you terrify me!"

"Oh, no, don't let what I say upset you. I'm not a prophet. I'm just speculating on the possibilities. . ."

"Your possibilities are very plausible ones!"

"An awful lot of plausible possibilities, though, never happen in actual fact. Now, Giselle, stop upsetting yourself. Why, you've turned ashen white!"

Linette took her friend's hands and found them stone cold.

"For heaven's sake Giselle, don't let mere imaginings make you ill!" she exclaimed, wishing she hadn't said so much.

"You must excuse me, Linette; I don't feel too good."

"Have a drink and you'll soon feel better. Where're you going?"

"To my room. André keeps a flask of very old brandy there. It's just the stuff for me at the moment!"

"Sh-ll I come with you?"

"No, thanks. I shan't be a moment. You stay with the others."

The MacPhersons accepted their unexpected invitation readily enough. They liked the Ruffels and the Pelissiers. The touch of Latin lightness and gaiety they got from them helped to dispel the air of puritanism that hung around their own strict missionary lives.

Linette received them. Mrs. MacPherson was full of curiosity about the why and the wherefore of the surprise party.

"So Madame Vigneul is leaving us?" she asked.

"Yes. Business affairs. . . She's been called back to France."

"The Pelissiers will be heartbroken at her going back so quickly, won't they?"

"Yes, of course."

Mrs. MacPherson lowered her voice to whisper confidentially to Linette:

"Tell me, dear, is it true what I hear, that the two sisters don't get on too well? I hope not! What do you think?"

'Linette replied with airy diplomacy that even the best regulated families occasionally had their little tiffs. Relations don't always see eye to eye on things. . .

"I was told in the greatest confidence that the beautiful Madame was—er. . . I hardly like to say!"

"Was what?"

"The mistress of her brother-in-law."

"Pshaw! People exaggerate an awful lot, Mrs. MacPherson."

"Also that Mme. Pelissier is jealous of her sister."

"What next! We've certainly got some lively imaginations round here!"

"It's not true, is it?"

"Of course not!"

"All the same, my good man, who has plenty of savvy, you know—and experience to go with it—smelt a rat as soon as he heard that Mme. Vigneul was leaving. He told me about the case of an English political agent he knew in Lahore in 1908 who had a wife older than himself and was completely bored with her although they had been making the best of it for fifteen years. One day the wife's younger sister, Gwendoline, arrived on a visit from Edinburgh. Catastrophe followed. The man was torn between his conjugal duty and the temptation to flirt on the sly with the girl, who was an attractive lively piece, and quite partial to her brother-in-law."

"Oh. . . so what was the end of that story?"

"It ended very badly. The wife tried to commit suicide. The husband divorced her in order to live with the girl, but she threw him up after six months. So, he lost a plain but devoted wife and an attractive but frivolous mistress. Between the two he went neurotic and threw himself off the top of the cliffs of Dover last year."

"As far as I can see, Mrs. MacPherson, your story certainly has no bearing on the Pelsier family."

"Good! Good! May God grant that you're right!"

Linette took Mrs. MacPherson to the buffet where André, Anna and the missionary were listening to Dr. Ruffec's fund of stories, almost as if they had never heard them before.

As he handed Anna a glass of champagne, MacPherson asked casually:

"Are you going straight back to Paris, Mme. Vigneul?"

Anna hesitated.

"I've hardly decided about that yet. I've got three weeks before I'm wanted in Paris, so I could stop off here and there, couldn't I? I might stay a while in Bombay."

Giselle reappeared and Linette at once went up to her to ask how she was feeling. The answer was: "A little better."

"Forget what I said a little while ago," whispered Giselle.

"I can't," came the swift whispered reply.

Anna drew Dr. Ruffec aside. She took a strange little object out of her handbag—something she had picked

up in the Indian market at Chandernagor—and asked him what it was.

"It's a Hindu religious symbol," he told her. "A little linsang of carved stone, representing masculine virility, much honoured by women who want children. They adorn them with flowers, especially sweet-smelling frangipanes, to obtain the blessing of a numerous family."

"Oh! I'm not quite so ambitious!"

"Some women also use these things as a sort of charm to help them meet the right man—ideal husband, if such a phenomenon exists on this earth!"

"Oh course it does," broke in Linette in gay mood. "Look at yourself in the mirror, George!"

"Thanks, Linette dear! You're an optimist!"

"Don't be so modest, doctor," said Anna. "You and Linette are cited as one of the happiest couples within a good fifty miles of here."

"Then, in that case, André and Gislène make another of these models of conjugal bliss."

"You're right," said Anna. "They should get a diploma with honours. . ."

André was demurring modestly, so Anna became more emphatic.

"We must give them their due. My sister and brother-in-law should be sculptured in bronze and put on the mantelpieces of the unhappily married to give them an inspiring example. I'm not joking. I've seen them together, and there's never the shadow of a cloud between them. . ."

"Anna! For heaven's sake! That's enough for one evening!"

"You're making us blush up to the roots of our hair..."

"Let's drink a toast to them," exclaimed Anna, catching sight of Lakshmi who at that moment came in carrying the iced lemon squashes on a tray, which she deposited on a little table between two armchairs.

Anna busied herself passing the drinks round. Half a minute later she squealed out: "O-oh! Look!" in such a shrill voice that everyone looked and moved over in the direction indicated. Through the French windows they saw a sudden bright red glow in the sky over towards the Hoogli.

"It's fire, isn't it, doctor?" asked MacPherson.

"Yes, I should say it's in Sinclair's wood depot on the left bank of the river."

"Well, let it burn! André and Giselle, take your glasses for the solemn toast we're all going to drink! . . ."

It was Anna's voice recalling the spectators from contemplation of the distant fire. They obediently turned their backs on it, and Dr. Ruffec assuming the duties of toast-master, was heard facetiously commanding: "*Garde a vous!*"

Anna smiled, obviously pleased with this little touch of mock formality which had everyone expectantly waiting for her to make a speech.

"It is to thank you all for the wonderful welcome you have given me here in Bengal that I raise my glass and drink to your health, all of you—Dr. Ruffec and Madame Ruffec, Mr. and Mr. MacPherson, and finally to André and to you Giselle. May you celebrate your golden wedding here under the coco-nut palms which saw the beginning of your married life!"

Everybody hear-hear-ed, and Ruffec twiddled the knob of the radiogram, saying:

"What about a spot of sentimental music, eh?"

As the notes of a languorous blues pulsated through the room, the Doctor asked Anna for a dance.

"Madame Vigneul, I warn you, I dance like a bear, but I don't tread on my partner's toes!"

She assured him she wasn't in the least scared of his bear-dance, and off they sailed in time to the music.

André took Linette out on to the floor. The MacPhersons and Giselle looked on, and Lakshmi standing by the glasses she had brought in, was another spectator. She seemed to take particular interest in Anna's graceful gyrations as she moved round the room in the doctor's arms.

"Lakshmi, go and see whether the *Kitmatgar* has put the champagne on ice," ordered Giselle, who was sitting in her armchair smoking a cigarette.

The girl obeyed immediately.

The room grew close and seemed to be filled with the hot heavy scent of the red jasmine hedges in the garden. The harsh cry of a bird suddenly rent the blue serenity of the night outside, and as suddenly Anna stopped dancing as she and her partner were passing the wide-open French windows of the porch.

"I'm afraid I'm tiring you," said Ruffec. "There's just the teeniest bit of difference between Nijinsky and me, you know!"

Anna was leaning against the post of the open doorway.

"Doctor, I don't feel well," she said softly.

"What's the matter?" He came closer and began to take a professional interest.

"Oh,—sort of dizzy."

"Maybe it's because I was spinning you round too much. . . I'm sorry."

"No, it's not that."

"You certainly do look pale," said the doctor. "Come and rest on this sofa. I daresay it's this stifling humid heat. You're not used to it."

Anna could hardly walk the few steps to the sofa without leaning heavily on the Doctor's arm. She seemed to be in a bad way. André and Linette had stopped dancing and stared in amazement.

"What's the matter with her?" asked André of his partner.

"A touch of malaria perhaps. The mosquitoes are bad up there in Sylhet. Do you think she was stung?"

Ruffec was bending over Anna on the sofa with a serious face. His wife came up and asked if it was fever.

"No." His opinion was emphatic. "Her hands are icy cold," he announced as he felt Anna's pulse.

Giselle asked if she should go and get some quinine from her room. The Doctor looked more and more puzzled.

"Her breathing is laboured. It doesn't look at all like fever to me," he said.

Anna had been inert on the sofa for some minutes, with half-closed eyes. Suddenly she cried out in a voice of anguish:

"Doctor, doctor! It hurts here—A-ah!"

Her hands clutched at her abdomen and she fell back with her knees drawn up and her head sunken among the cushions.

"Help me to get her into her room," the doctor ordered to André.

She was all but unconscious when they laid her on her bed.

The consternation of the MacPhersons, who had



stayed in the lounge with Linette and Giselle, was extreme. They sat tense in their chairs with carefully arranged expressions of sympathy on their faces. B.P. turned to Giselle and asked in a grave voice:

"What has happened to your sister, Mrs. Pelissier?"

"I don't know, Mr. MacPherson. I can't understand it."

"Has she been feverish at all?"

"No."

"The extraordinary thing," said Linette, intervening in the conversation, "is that she was in such wonderful form to-night. So gay and full of life! Had she ever complained of anything, Giselle?"

"Absolutely nothing! She has a iron constitution and hasn't had the slightest indisposition since she came here."

André re-appeared, and everybody asked him what the Doctor thought now.

"He says it's serious. He's sent Mukerji to the clinic for some medicines and his instruments. He may have to give her an injection. He looks decidedly worried. I asked him if it was an acute case of appendix, and he said categorically: 'Impossible!'"

The nurse in Linette grew alarmed as she thought of all the complications that might ensue and how difficult it would be to get the patient properly attended to in that wild spot.

"The best thing," she concluded, "would be to get her to Calcutta. Dr. Slater there is a friend of George. He'd take her in his clinic. She'd be well looked after there."

André pointed out the futility of making hypothetical plans while no one knew what was the matter with the

patient, and a gloomy silence fell on the room. He strolled uneasily out to the verandah lit a cigarette and stood there smoking and watching out for the return of Mukerji on his bicycle.

Said Linette under her breath to Giselle:

"Her departure to-morrow is pretty uncertain now."

"Afraid so," agreed Giselle.

"Such a sudden seizure, though, is strange! Has she ever had any heart trouble, angina, for instance?"

"She's never been ill in her life."

Lakshmi had come back into the room and stood by the buffet, expressionless and impassive. Giselle glanced at the girl and asked:

"Lakshmi, has Mme. Vignuel ever complained of feeling unwell at all to you, or when you were in the room?"

"No, memsahib, never."

"It's incomprehensible. . ."

Doctor Ruffec came back at this moment and his wife bounded over to him asking:

"Well, George, what's the matter with her?"

Ruffec ignored the question and turned to Giselle.

"What did she have to eat to-day?" he asked.

"She disappeared at eleven o'clock this morning and returned with you, Doctor."

Ruffec turned to the MacPhersons.

"Mme. Vigneul had lunch with you this afternoon, didn't she?"

Mrs. MacPherson spoke up with great energy and emphasis.

"Yes. She ate the same as we had, a lamb cutlet with tinned French beans. . . Exactly the same as us, and we haven't been ill, have we B.P.?"

The missionary nodded his assent and observed that American canned food had never harmed anyone.

Ruffec next questioned his wife.

"What has she had to drink?"

Andre answered for Linette:

"Iced lemon squash, the same as you had yourself, the same as all of us had."

"Where is her glass?"

Giselle and Linette looked round the room for a moment in perplexity. Then Linette did a little reconstruction.

"When she proposed her toast she was standing in front of this little table. My glass I remember putting over there. . . This one must be hers. Here you are George. Why d'you want it?"

Ruffec took the glass very carefully, in his hand, scrutinised it and said:

"It will be necessary to analyse the dregs."

"Why, doctor?" someone asked.

"It's a typical case of poisoning," he announced holding the glass up to the light and looking through it.

The word "poisoning" let commotion loose in the room. Giselle turned pale, and André hastened to her side. Seizing her hand and pressing it to his he called out:

"Poisoning? What d'you mean doctor? You know that's impossible!"

The doctor shook his head obstinately and stood his ground.

"The patient has all the symptoms of a very serious case of poisoning."

"What poison?"

"Strychnine."

### *Part Three*

## CHAPTER I

### *Murder or Suicide?*

ANNA died at dawn. Dr. Ruffec, who had not left her bedside all night was convinced beyond any doubt that she had received a very powerful dose of sulphate of strychnine.

The "surprise party" guests waited till the very end hoping against hope that the doctor would be able to save the sufferer with his injections and other remedies. When Ruffec announced that Anna's last moments had come and there was no more hope, the missionary approached Giselle with a grave face and asked her if she wished him to go and say prayers for the dying at her sister's bedside, since there was no Catholic priest available. Giselle in a choking voice said "Yes."

The symptoms Ruffec had carefully noted were the classic ones of strychnine poisoning in its most virulent form: convulsive seizures, inability to speak, locked jaws, bloated congestion of the face and neck, staring eyes with dilated pupils, a struggle for breath which nothing could relieve.

The tragic end to what had promised to be a pleasant little party forced the doctor to assume an unpleasant official role. Sensing that he would have some sort of an

announcement to make, everybody gathered round him when he left the death chamber.

"The exceptional circumstances in which Madame Vigneul has died," he told them, "do not permit me to sign the death certificate. My conscience and the law both require me to report this tragic case to the Indian police. Death by poisoning usually is either suicide or murder."

Turning to André and Giselle, the doctor added:

"This is most painful to me, my friends, but you will understand, I'm sure, that I have no choice in the matter."

\* \* \* \*

The sudden death of the wealthy beauty from Paris shook the whole population of Chandernagor. For days it was the chief topic of conversation, even as far afield as Bengal, Calcutta and New Delhi: The newspapers were filled with speculation and reports of police investigation of this mysterious fatality.

Hardly were the autopsy and the analysis of the dregs of the fatal glass concluded—with results that wholly confirmed Dr. Ruffec's diagnosis—than the police arrived on the scene. Superintendent Khitindra Majumdar of the province C.I.D. was chosen for the job because he had an impressive reputation for the successful handling of crimes in which Europeans were involved. His methods of interrogation were considered models of penetrating insight, logic and precision.

He was a Bengali, close on fifty, tall, lean, agile and poker-faced. His steel-rimmed spectacles took the edge off the piercing gaze of his extremely black eyes. He had started his career in the Bengal Lancers when it was commanded by British officers. On joining the police,

his keenness and ability to unravel mysteries soon won him promotion, first to the post of inspector at Darjeeling, then to superintendent. His special assignments had included the reorganisation of the police force in the state governed by the Maharajah of Bikaner.

When he was being briefed for the Vigneul case, his chief at Calcutta warned him:

"I need hardly draw your attention to the prickly character of this affair. Should it turn out to be suicide, it will be soon over and excite little attention. If it's murder, then the press of the world will be on our trail. You will have to exercise extreme tact and caution because you are not dealing here with common criminals, but with people whose integrity is above reproach. There are three persons principally involved: a husband, a wife and the husband's former mistress. A *crime passionnel* is not to be ruled out; but the question of motive is complicated by the wealth of the deceased and the want of the husband, who is practically a bankrupt. So, old man, my advice to you is: go easy, very easy!

Before setting out for Chandernagor, Superintendent Majumdar drew up a list of witnesses to be questioned, and it included those who were but very indirectly concerned. His idea was to get what is known as background information. As he spoke English fluently he started with the MacPhersons.

"Mr. MacPherson," he began, "the first thing that occurs to one in this case is—was it suicide or murder? Have you any views or opinions one way or the other, taking the relevant facts into account?"

"I can easily answer that question, Superintendent, I have no facts on which to base an opinion one way or

the other; but I can give you my personal opinion for what it is worth."

"Well, what is it?"

"From my knowledge of the deceased lady, I find it impossible to believe that she committed suicide."

"Your reason?"

"There are several. She never gave me the impression while she was here of being ~~neurotic~~ or unbalanced. Right up to the night she died she was full of interest in life in India. She made a sudden decision to terminate her visit, owing to urgent business matters to attend to in France, which wasn't surprising—she was so rich. She decided along with the Ruffecs to throw a surprise farewell party for her hosts. She was in the best of spirits. My wife and I would never have supposed that at that party at about half past ten she would suddenly begin to feel ill as the result of a drink."

"It was lemon squash, wasn't it?"

"Precisely—served by the maid Lakshmi. And we all drank it."

"From this it follows that either Mme. Vigneul put the strychnine into her glass herself, or someone else did without being observed."

"In other words there was an assassin, a murderer at that party? . . ."

"That's the logical conclusion. . . yes."

"Actually, I couldn't point to anyone. . .", MacPherson hastened to explain. "Where's the motive? Even allowing for the fact that perfect harmony did not always exist between the two sisters and Pelissier, that is no reason for supposing that one or other of them is guilty. There's all the difference in the world between. . . Unless. . . No! It would be ridiculous!"

"Unless what, Mr. MacPherson?"

"Oh, nothing, really. . . It could hardly have anything to do with Mme. Vigneul's death. It was a little incident that occurred at a party that the Pelissiers gave when Mme. Vigneul arrived, and we've only got the servant's word for it. The Pelissiers' maid gossiped to my *chaprassi* and he passed it on to the *chokador*. Well, Malouk was among the guests at that party. You know him, I suppose?"

"The big tea planter? Yes."

"It seems he was very much taken with the beautiful Mme. Vigneul and forgot himself to the extent of grabbing her to kiss her by force, for which he received two sharp slaps on the face from Madame."

"And then what happened?"

"Malouk was so infuriated he's never been seen at the Pelissiers' bungalow since."

The detective considered this new information for a moment, then asked:

"What do you conclude from this, Mr. MacPherson?"

"Oh nothing. . . I just thought I might as well mention it."

"On the face of it, one would hardly expect a man to nurse such a revenge for a woman who had slapped his face that he would plan her death by poison!"

"Normally, no. On the other hand Malouk is a fool, full of vanity and has a terrific opinion of himself. He has the reputation of seeing red and being very vindictive if people get in his way. But, of course, as you say, from that to the extreme of murdering a woman who had the audacity to smack his face, is a long step. . . I leave you to judge. . ."

"Exactly! That's just what I'm going to do Mr.



MacPherson. Thank you very much. I hope I haven't taken up too much of your time. Good day."

The Superintendent ordered Inspector Ram Singh, who was acting as his driver and assistant, to drive him to Malouk's office.

"While I'm inside," he told him, "you drive to the Pelissiers' bungalow and get Lakshmi, Madame Pelissier's maid, to come along with you. Wait outside Malouk's with her in the car. I'll call you when I need you."

## CHAPTER II

### *Malouk on the mat*

THE Chandernagor branch of the Malouk Trading Company, whose head office was at Sylhet, was housed on the ground floor of a white building owned by a Hooghly shipping concern. At the moment when the police superintendent walked in, Malouk was on the telephone to his agent at Dacca, and didn't want to be disturbed. The clerk who went into his room to announce the arrival of the unexpected visitor from Calcutta was waved impatiently aside before he had time to open his mouth. The man was so impressed and intimidated by the arrival of such a high-ranking police officer, however, that he stood deferentially in front of his chief's desk waiting for the telephone conversation to end.

When at last Malouk hung up he snapped:

"What! You still there? Don't you see I'm busy?"

"There's a police officer to see you, sir."

"A what? What does he want here? Has my chauffeur knocked down a sacred cow? . . . Bah! Tell him I've no time for him."

"It's Superintendent Majumdar of Calcutta C.I.D., sir. Says he must speak to you about a personal matter, sir."

Malouk's flabby moon face contorted with an expression in which boredom and irritation were equally mingled.

"Tell him I'm extremely busy, but I'll see him for two minutes."

When the policeman was shown in Malouk was feverishly shuffling papers on his desk. He decided politeness was the best aid to cutting this visit as short as possible. Whatever it was about he believed on principle in having as little to do with the police as possible.

"Ah, sit down, Superintendent! I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting; but I'm up to the eyes with work. . . What can I do for you?"

Very slowly and deliberately the detective answered:

"It's about the incident that took place at the Pelissiers' on the night of November 29. . .

"Madame Vigneul's death, you mean? I heard about it next day. I wasn't there, you know."

"Yes, I know. All the same, I should like to ask you a few questions. Have you known the dead woman's sister and brother-in-law for long?"

"Oh, yes. Some years."

"Do you have direct business contact with Mr. Pelissier?"

Malouk heaved a sigh before replying;

"Unfortunately, yes!"

"You say 'unfortunately', I imagine, because your business relations have not been too friendly for some time now."

"And not without reason! For, the past two years Pelissier has been in a bad way. I went to his rescue and he now owes me approximately 700,000 rupees."

"Which he can't pay, I suppose?"

"Of course he can't! I've given him notice to pay the money within a certain time limit. If he doesn't—well, he'll be declared a bankrupt. Business is business!"

"Yes, I understand. . ."

"His attitude throughout has been most—unsatisfactory to say the least, and I've told him so. In view of his stubborn refusal to co-operate with me in this matter, I have no alternative but to put it into the hands of my legal advisers. And that's all I can tell you, and all you want to know, I guess!"

To Malouk's disappointment, the detective did not take the hint, but sat stolidly on. After a moment's silence, he asked:

"I'm told you knew Mme. Vigneul, Mr. Malouk?"

"Slightly only. I met her for the first time the day after her arrival from France."

"What did you think of her?"

"Absolutely charming! Elegant, a good conversationalist, a woman who commands admiration wherever she goes!"

"Do you think she would be capable of committing suicide?"

"Suicide? Suicide? Are you kidding. Superintendent? If ever a woman had her feet planted firmly on the ground and looked facts straight in the face, that woman was Mme. Vigneul—the embodiment of practical common-sense, I should say. . ."

"Then, you think suicide is out of the question?"

"I'm not swearing to anything where any woman is concerned, but I believe she was no more anxious to take her life than you or I."

"Then her death is the result of a criminal action?"

"Quite likely."

"Right. . Who could be guilty among the Europeans who knew her? . . . Let's proceed by a process of elimination. There's yourself. . ."

"Me? Ha!-ha!-ha! I'd like to know why I should want to do away with Mme Vigneul?"

"Mr. Malouk I may as well tell you that what you say about the deceased doesn't square up with our information about your relations with her. It appears that the very first time you met her, at the Pelissiers' home, your remarks to her were so—er unseemly, to put it mildly, that she slapped your face?"

"Pah! We had a little disagreement—certainly nothing to take tragically."

"But, in any case, she did smack you in the face?"

"Oh, as usual with such incidents, the thing's been exaggerated!"

"That remains to be seen. I have called Lakshmi, Mde. Pelissier's maid, as a witness. She's waiting outside in the car."

The Superintendent stood up and went out to get the witness brought in. Malouk controlled his feelings as best he could, lighting a cigarette to give himself a nonchalant air.

When Lakshmi came into the room she looked from one to the other of the two men and saluted the Superintendent in the traditional manner, bowing from the waist with hands clasped as in prayer in front of her.

The Superintendent pointed to Malouk sprawling in his chair, and started his interrogation.

"Who is this gentle man?"

"Mr. Malouk, sir."

"Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes, I've often seen him in the house where I work."

"When did you last see him?"

"A month ago—the evening my mistress gave the party for Mme. Vigneul."

"Now tell me what you told Mr. MacPherson's man servant."

"I was standing in the doorway, behind the bead curtain and saw Mr. Malouk and Mme. Vigneul talking."

"Did you hear what they were saying?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Malouk tried to take Madame Vigneul in his arms and, as she didn't like it, she gave him a smack in the face."

"Did you see her do it?"

"Yes, I saw her do it as plainly as I see you, sir, now, and Mr. Malouk—he was furious with me! He used insulting language to me. He said in French: 'You filthy little bitch, get out of here or I'll flay the skin off your rump! That will teach you some manners.' I was frightened then, and ran away as fast as I could."

Turning to Malouk, the detective asked if he understood Bengali, in which tongue Lakshmi had given her evidence, and what he had to say.

Malouk sat bolt upright in his chair, furious to have been made a liar of by the girl.

"She exaggerates the whole thing!" he shouted. "Slapped my face indeed! Why not an uppercut, eh? Madame Vigneul gave me a light little tap, a friendly pat such as any coquettish young lady gives a gentleman for fun in a drawing room."

Lakshmi wasn't going to let that pass.

"No, *sahib*," she protested to the detective, "it wasn't a

light little tap. The slap she gave him could have been heard as far away as the Hoogli! Besides, Mme. Vigneul looked very cross!"

The Superintendent appeared satisfied. He called his inspector, Ram Singh, who was waiting in the passage outside, and told him he had finished with the witness who could now be driven back home. But he hadn't finished with Malouk.

"It appears, Mr. Malouk, that there's a difference of opinion about the strength of that slap in the face! Above all this girl says Madame Vigneul was very annoyed, a circumstance which has been borne out by the fact that you haven't set foot in the Pelissiers' bungalow since that night. Everything points to a violent quarrel between you and the deceased."

Malouk decided he had better admit some of it.

"Very well, then; let's admit I got a bit too fresh with Mme. Vigneul, and that she put me in my place. . . That's no reason for jumping to the conclusion that I wanted to poison her! If I were to administer poison to all the women who have given me the brush-off, I'd have gone into the undertaking business long ago. You know how it is, Superintendent. . . A peach of a woman comes along; you start paying attention to her. . . you hot things up. . . If it works, that's fine; if it doesn't—well, what about it? You wait for the next tempting number. . ."

"You don't sound like the kind of man to take your sentimental affairs too seriously," commented the detective.

"Not likely! I always say 'Women are like motor-buses: if you miss one, jump on the next!' Seriously, Commissioner, it's none of my business to make

suggestions, or tell you how to do your own job but isn't the first thing to decide in a murder case: who stands to profit by the murder? That's so, isn't it? Then, in the present case the answer should not be so difficult to find. You know all about Madame Vigneul's financial status, don't you?"

"Capital of 300 million francs, more or less."

"Yes, left her by her late husband, the old rascal. You know also that Mme. Vigneul hadn't a relation in the world apart from her sister and brother-in-law, and the brother-in-law had debts amounting to ten million francs without a hope of being able to meet them. . . What would you have done in his place?"

"Mr. Malouk!" sternly exclaimed the shocked voice of the law.

"I'm sorry. . . no offence intended. It was just a manner of speaking to illustrate my point. With the death of the wealthy sister-in-law, the bankrupt is refloated, since he is married to the wealthy widow's sole heir."

"So, you think the motive was money."

"That conclusion is inescapable! Look where you will, you come up against money in this case. With his back to the wall Pelissier would have said to himself: 'In this God forsaken hole it should be easy to get away with murder. . . not too much fuss about death certificates and all that. . . my old pal Dr. Ruffec can easily think up causes of death. . . What the eye does not see, the heart doesn't grieve for! Besides fatal accidents—sun-stroke, snake-bite, mosquitoes, fevers—are quite common in this part of the world. Death comes quickly, and the funeral is all over quickly because of the heat. . .'"



"You haven't much of an opinion of your fellow men, have you Mr. Malouk?"

"My dear Superintendent, I've seen too much in thirty years of knocking about the world to have any illusions left. You want evidence; all I can give you (because I wasn't there) is an opinion. As for trying to fix any suspicion on me, let me assure you I never make risky investments! And if it wouldn't have been risky for me to procure strychnine, my name's not Malouk! You'd have looked me a once. . . What a price to pay for the satisfaction of avenging myself on a poor woman who couldn't bear the sight of me!"

Majumdar seemed satisfied. He stood up and said that would be all for that day, but he would be glad if Malouk would hold himself in readiness should he be required again.

"You will always find me" here, Superintendent," declared Malouk, now restored to good humour, "and I'll always be at your service in the cause of justice. One thing is certain, and that is that if there is a murderer to be found, you'll get him."

“ ”

### CHAPTER III

*"Someone must have killed her!"*

**M**AJUMDAR'S next call was on Dr. Ruffec at his clinic. An elderly Bengali nurse-receptionist let him in. Fluttering with nerves at the sight of the police—one inside and one waiting outside in the car—she asked timidly:

"Is the doctor expecting you?"

"He's not, but he won't be surprised to see me when you tell him who I am," came the reply.

In fact, Ruffec wasn't in the least surprised. He had been expecting a visit from the police for days. Majumdar explained that he wanted to consult him less in his official medical capacity than as a friend of the Pelissier family, and hinted that he was keen to get the mystery of Mme. Vigneul's death cleared up for the sake of the prestige of the Bengal Police.

He drew a sheaf of papers out of his brief case. From them he took one small document. It was Dr. Ruffec's report to the police.

"Now, let's see. . . going over your report step by step. . . Death took place at 4 a.m. on November 30th. The quantity of strychnine taken was so large that nothing could be done for the victim. Here, by the way, is the report of the analyst on the remains of the drink

in the glass the deceased used. The question we have to answer now is 'Who put the poison in the glass?' "

"That's the enigma, Superintendent!" commented Ruffec.

"The first step towards the answer is to find out where the poison came from. It's not as if Mme. Vigneul had taken an over-dose of barbiturate sleeping tablets. My inspector found no such tablets, or any other drug whatever in her luggage. And a fashionable lady doesn't usually travel with a bottle of strychnine mixed up with her perfumes. . . Where, then, did she get it?"

The doctor stood up.

"If you would care to come with me, I shall show you something that may help you in your investigation, Superintendent."

Ruffec led the way into his dispensary. It was lined with shelves on which stood hundreds of bottles large and small, filled with liquids, tablets, powders, all neatly labelled. The doctor opened a small cupboard in which the poisonous drugs were stored apart from the rest. Taking a bottle labelled *sulphate of strychnine*, he held it up saying:

"See that! This bottle was full the day before Mme. Vigneul's death. Now it's only two-thirds full. Someone has removed more than enough to kill a man."

"So, now we know where the poison came from, doctor. The next thing is to find out who took it. How many people knew where you keep your drugs?"

"Apart from me, there's my wife and Mme. Pelissier who sometimes assists my wife's voluntary labours in the clinic. Nobody else."

"What about Madame Vigneul?"

"SOMEONE MUST HAVE KILLED HER!" 161

"To my knowledge, she didn't appear to take much interest in tropical diseases and our methods of treatment for the native population here."

"I see. On top of that, is it likely that if Madame Vigneul really wanted to kill herself she would have chosen to do it in so open and spectacular a manner? Would she want to throw a cocktail party in order to kill herself in front of her guests and her friends?"

"No, . . . hardly!" said the doctor.

Majumdar was determined to get to the bottom of the suicide theory, sift all the evidence and have done with it. He had noted carefully MacPherson's emphatic reaction to the suggestion that Madame Vigneul might have killed herself. Now he wanted the doctor's reaction on this point, and tried to draw him out.

"According to our information, Mme. Vigneul was extremely wealthy."

"That is correct."

"Absolutely no financial worries then?"

"None whatever."

"Any sentimental reason? A broken love affair, for instance, sometimes leads people to suicide."

Ruffec quickly said: "No, none," fully aware that here he was on delicate ground. As a friend of the Pelissiers he could not speak frankly and reveal all he knew about their private domestic drama. It was none of his business to act as police informer, his personal opinions were his own concern.

"The fact is, then, that on the evidence suicide must be ruled out," summed up Majumdar.

As Dr. Ruffec said nothing, he went on:

"The alternative is murder of a premeditated kind."

The doctor made no comment, and the policeman persisted in his statements of the obvious:

"Whoever put the poison in Mme. Vigneul's glass that night must have got the poison in advance and watched out for the most favourable opportunity to get her to drink it. . ."

At last Ruffec said:

"No doubt—but how can you prove it?"

"Had Mme. Vigneul any enemies here?"

"Not that I know of. She had no business connections. . . I can't imagine anyone here wanting to kill her."

"Nevertheless somebody *did* kill her! She wasn't stabbed in the bush by a crazy native. In view of the fact that she died of strychnine poisoning, and that the strychnine was procured here, the murderer must have been a European. Who else had access to your dispensary? Who else would have been able to pick out the poison from so many bottles, all labelled in a language that is incomprehensible to the native of Chandernagor?"

"Your deductions are perfectly logical, Superintendent."

"Well, doctor, I must continue my investigations from the point at which we've arrived. Chance plays a big part in solving crime riddles for the police, you know. I hope the god of chance is on my side."

With that he thanked Ruffec and went out, convinced that the doctor knew a good deal more than he cared to admit.

"The deeper I go into this affair, the more I'm convinced it's a murder, and not suicide," he told his inspector outside in the car.

"SOMEONE MUST HAVE KILLED HER!" 163

"Where are we going next?" asked the inspector.

"Do you know where the Ruffecs live?"

"Yes, it's about five minutes from here."

"Right. Drive there. I want to talk to the doctor's wife.

## CHAPTER. IV

### *The Sisters . . .*

The Ruffecs' bungalow was smaller than that of the Pelissiers. It stood at the intersection of two roads in a pretty garden behind a tall screening hedge of bamboo.

Linette was always warned of approaching visitors by her pet monkey in a cage near the gate. This watchful animal, whose name was Julot, was as good as a door-keeper. As soon as anyone crossed the garden in the direction of the front door, Julot sounded the alarm by banging a stone on an old bracket. Thanks to Julot, Linette had a quick glimpse of her police visitor before she opened the door to him.

Not without misgivings, she showed him into their little sitting-room. Majumdar was on his best behaviour, and full of apologies for having to talk about a subject which he said he knew must be painful to her.

"It is because you are such a close friend of the Pelissier family that I want to talk to you, Madame Ruffec. You have known them a long time, I believe?"

"Ever since they first came here, nearly eight years ago."

"Ah, then you're the ideal person to put me right on the point I want to clear up!"

Linette tried to side-track whatever was coming:

"It would be better if you went and saw my husband. He is better qualified than I to. . ."

"I've just seen him. We had a long talk at the clinic. What I want to ask you has nothing to do with medicine and the effects of poisons. It's the *personal* side of this tragic affair I'm interested in now. I'm sure you can help me. To start with I'd like to ask you a very simple question: Do the Pelissiers get on well together?"

Without the slightest hesitation Linette answered:

"Wonderfully well. They're as much in love now as the day they married."

"Your sure it's reciprocal? I mean does M. Pelissier love his wife as much as she does him?"

"Oh, absolutely!"

"You're an intimate friend of theirs, so you'd know if this harmonious relationship were real or only assumed?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Oh—everyone knows there are couples who for various reasons, religious convictions and so on, keep up the appearance of getting on well together, when in reality the husband and wife have nothing in common and live apart under the same roof."

"I assure you the Pelissiers aren't in the least like that!"

"Very well—not a cloud on the domestic horizon. But the financial situation, I believe, leaves much to be desired."

"That's true."

"Mr. Malouk, who had business dealings with Pelissier, told me something about it."

"Oh, if you listen to him, you'll be listening to a hard



and hostile creditor. He's a shark in my opinion."

"I hear that Mr. Malouk intends to apply for a bankruptcy order against Mr. Pelissier."

"I'm afraid he does."

"And how has Madame Pelissier taken all this?"

"She's been terribly worried at the prospect of seeing all these years of her husband's work wiped out, as it were."

"Coming back to personal relations, what sort of relationship existed between Mme. Pelissier and Mme. Vigneul?"

"Why, they were sisters, or half sisters, to be exact."

"That doesn't mean a thing. Brothers and sisters often hate each other."

"Giselle was very fond of her sister."

"Did she invite her to come and see her?"

"No. Anna came of her own accord to see what sort of a life her sister was leading in India. This was after she had nothing to keep her in Paris."

"Now I'm going to touch on a very delicate subject. It's extremely important and I must ask you to be as precise as possible in your reply to my question. Is it true, as I understand it, that Mr. Pelissier was Mme. Vigneul's lover before his marriage?"

Giselle instinctively hesitated before this leading question. She was on the point of saying, no, it wasn't true; then decided on evasion.

"I really don't know anything definitely. I've heard rumours, of course, but they could easily be the work of spiteful gossips."

"Mme. Pelissier then, presumably, saw nothing out of the ordinary in having her husband's former mistress to stay with her husband and herself. She thought it quite

natural, did she? Please be frank, Madame Ruffec."

"Good heavens, yes, I mean, no. . . that is, at least she welcomed her to her home."

"Yet she had every reason for condemning the tactless indiscretion of a woman who risked reviving an old flame in this way, even though the woman was her sister."

"She certainly had. . . Personally, I thought Mme. Vigneul's intrusion in this way decidedly lacking in tact."

"You say 'intrusion'. What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Oh, I mean—Anna could have exercised more discretion."

"In what way?"

"In being more. . . well. . . less. . . I mean she needn't have concentrated so much of her attention on her host."

"On M. Pelissier?"

"Yes. . . She went out with him quite a lot. She went with him on his tours of inspection at Sylhet, and that sort of thing."

"Why?"

"Realising she had said too much, Linette hastened to make amends by presenting Anna's conduct in a better light:

"She wanted to gain firsthand experience of life in the tropics, of course. It was all so new to her."

"Mme. Ruffec, we possess very detailed information. You need have no qualms about confirming what was common knowledge in the neighbourhood."

"Really, nobody knew anything."

"Well, anyway, it was well known among the friends'

of the Pelissiers that Mme. Vignéul was infatuated with her former lover.

"I wouldn't care to say so, without some proof."

"To put it bluntly, she was trying to win him back!"

"I never saw anything that would suggest such a thing."

"It's understandable enough isn't it? You don't have to be a clairvoyant to see what happened. Mme. Vignéul, the widow of a rich financier, is haunted by sentimental memories of her romantic interlude with Pelissier before she married and harkens after some more on the same old lines. Naturally, Mme. Pelissier sees what's going on. . . You are a close friend and in her confidence. She must have spoken to you about her fears?"

"She has never done so."

"Other witnesses have told me differently, then. Mme. Pelissier seems to have had every reason for disquiet over her sister's behaviour which threatened to break up her married life."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that!"

There was a silence during which the detective looked carefully at Linette as if taking stock of an adversary; then he changed his tactics, with a new line in interrogation.

"Mme. Ruffec, it's no use beating about the bush and trying to hide the truth. Your reticence serves no purpose whatever—not even to hold up the investigations I'm making."

"What do you mean?"

"Has a jealous woman never been known to seek to get rid of a rival by any means in her power? That situation strikes me as being classic!"

The annals of judiciary proceedings all over the world are full of such cases. . . .”

“It’s impossible! Giselle is the very soul of gentleness. She’s incapable of harbouring revenge against anyone.”

There was a silence during which the detective consulted his papers. Then, he asked:

“You were there, when it happened, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can tell me, perhaps, why Mme. Vigneul decided so suddenly to leave?”

“Giselle told me she had received a cable the evening before, summoning her back to France to attend to urgent business.”

“That wasn’t true. We know from checking with the post office at Calcutta that no cablegram was received. So why the sudden departure?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Picture a dramatic scene between the sisters. Mme. Pelissier heaps scathing abuse and reproaches on her sister, and finally tells her to go. Mme. Vigneul is furious, retaliates with threats and leaves. The next evening she reappears with you at the surprise party. . . . What was Mme. Pelissier’s reaction when she saw her sister back again?”

“She was very excited because she thought Anna had already gone.”

“Hardly! Her luggage was still there!”

“Oh, you ask too many questions!”

“What did Mme. Pelissier do when she saw her sister had come back?”

“She was rather agitated and went to her room to steady her nerves with a drink.”

“Or to mix a poisoned drink for her sister?”

"Oh, Superintendent! . . . You can't. . . !" exclaimed Linette almost speechless, with dismay and indignation.

"But you've just said she went out of the room."

"Certainly not for the purpose of mixing a poisoned drink!"

"How do you know?" Mme. Pelissier, finding she is defied by her sister, throws caution to the winds, loses her head. . . ."

"Giselle do a thing like that! She's as gentle as a lamb!"

"Sheep sometimes go mad, madame!"

"But the poison—Giselle never has poison in the house!"

"Don't be so sure about that! She helps at the clinic the same as you do, doesn't she? Now, here's something you might like to explain if you can. The doctor told me that the morning after M<sup>me</sup>. Vigneul's death he found one-third of the bottle of strychnine in his dispensary had been used. The night before the bottle was full."

Linette capitulated, not daring to say another word.

"I'm not making any charge yet," continued the policeman. "I have merely roughed out the lines which a charge of murder might possibly take. I'm making no affirmations. I leave that to the coroner in his summing up. In any case, thank you very much for your help."

With that he departed, leaving Linette to recover her wits as best she could.

She stood staring in front of her with unseeing eyes, her mind in a turmoil. Why, she asked herself, should Giselle want to poison a rival who was going away? The Superintendent's ideas simply didn't make sense! Then a thought struck her, and a chill of horror ran down her spine. She remembered her own words to Giselle that

night of the party: "Is she flying straight back to Paris, or stopping off somewhere in India?"

What a shock that question had been to poor Giselle! She obviously hadn't considered the possibility of Anna's departure being nothing but a blind. . . . Could it be that in the desperation of the moment she had decided to end it all—by . . . murder?

## CHAPTER V

*“One or the other is guilty”*

On leaving the Ruffés' bungalow, Superintendent Majumdar had his inspector drive him straight to the 'Pelissiers'.

He felt he was making progress. The last witness had been too cautious, but, all the same, despite her efforts to shield her friend, she had taken things on a stage further. The parts of the jigsaw were beginning to fit.

Inspector Ram Singh had carried out a search of the Pelissiers' bungalow the evening before, and found nothing. He had told the couple that the Superintendent would be coming to see them next day at noon.

Giselle received him in the lounge. The prospect of the interview was obviously painful to her. Majumdar in his most suave manner started off by apologising for the necessity for searching the bungalow the evening before.

“Just an official formality, you know. . . And now I know how you must be feeling about this tragedy, Madame Pelissier, so I'm going to be as brief as I can. I want you to spare your feelings as much as possible.”

Giselle was taken by surprise. She hadn't expected this show of sympathy.

"Thank you. It is a terrible tragedy," Superintendent, and I would be grateful if you could cut your interview to the minimum."

Majumdar nodded and murmured sympathetically that he knew what it was to lose a dearly loved sister. He had lost one only a few years back.

"I daresay you and your sister," he went on gently, "have always been very close to each other. . . Mme. Vigneul was the elder, wasn't she?"

"She was ten years older than I."

"And, no doubt, was like a mother to you in her care and affection?"

Giselle was off her guard again and allowed an exclamation of protest to escape her.

"You don't like me to say that she was very devoted to you and would do anything to make you happy? Isn't it true?"

Giselle wasn't astute enough to see through the Superintendent's tactics. She fell right into the trap he was setting for her.

"Do anything to make me happy! That's far from the truth. I'm afraid you're giving my sister qualities that didn't belong to her!"

"How's that? According to the information we have had from Interpol, Mme. Vigneul was devoted to you, and even married M. Vigneul for your sake—to avoid coming between you and the man who was to be your husband."

The air of candour with which Majumdar detailed his alleged Interpol communication had just the effect he intended it should have. Giselle was up in arms, shocked, hurt, indignant.

"Really, that's a bit too much!" she scoffed. "Where



on earth could they have got hold of such complete poppycock?"

The wily politician affected the greatest astonishment, and laid on his apologies with elaborate courtesy.

"Madame Pelissier, I'm extremely sorry! Please accept my apology. You must realise that I personally had nothing whatever to do with the compiling of this dossier of information. I naturally accepted it as reliable since it came through to us from the *Sûreté*; but it doesn't matter—I only mentioned these matters in passing. . ."

"Making Anna out as a model of sisterly affection!" pursued Giselle, ignoring him. "What next! Anna sacrificing herself for my sweet sake! Anna stepping aside so that I could marry André! . . . Anna who was André's mistress for three years, and considered me a sentimental little softie! It's just fantastic, Superintendent!"

"I see. I can but note your objections, which, I'm sure, are made in all sincerity, Mme. Pelissier."

A sudden gust of anger swept over Giselle at the thought of the Calcutta police solemnly recording all this lying claptrap, and she felt she must put matters right once and for all. Majumdar seemed to regard anything that came from his colleagues over in Paris as gospel truth. . . Well, she'd enlighten him!

"Madame Vigneul," she began in a tone sharpened by anger, "wouldn't lift her little finger to help me! Which isn't so very surprising after her relations with my husband for three whole years! . . ."

Majumdar took off his steel-rimmed spectacles in order to study the face of the angry woman opposite him.

"Three years?" he echoed sympathetically. "Ah, well, then Mmc. Vigneul and your husband. . ."

"Why, of course! . . . And in all that time they were together, she never so much as mentioned my name to him, I might not have existed."

"In that case, you won't mind my saying, I hope, that it was a strange thing for her to do—come to India as soon as she was widowed, knowing she would meet the man she had been so attached to. . ."

"Certainly you may say it was odd," Superintendent. "It's just as if you had a man friend who is married and one day your friend's brother, who had been the lover of your friend's wife before she married, one day this man turns up at their home to stay with them. . ."

"An awkward situation, to say the least!"

"Oh, but there's more to it than that! What would you say if the former lover started to pay married attentions to the wife under her husband's nose, without concerning himself in the least about what he or anyone else thought—behaving, in fact, as if he aimed at reviving the old relationship between them?"

"I don't know what I'd say or do in a situation like that, but I do know it would have a bad ending!"

"Well, there you have in a nutshell what I had to endure from the sister who was so 'fond' of me, while she stayed here."

The Superintendent felt he was seeing things much more clearly now.

"It must have been a daily martyrdom for you!" he murmured sympathetically.

"I assure you it cost me a good deal to keep a smile on

my face as if I was aware of nothing, and bottle up my feelings."

"Why didn't you tell your sister she'd have to go?"

"If we'd been in Paris, I shouldn't have hesitated a moment. But she had come all the way out here to see us. She had just lost a husband—was lonely, probably. I just didn't have the heart to talk to her with the out-and-out candour her conduct deserved. I tried to be patient, saying little but thinking plenty. . ."

"Not many women would have had your patience, Mme. Pelessier, especially in view of the strain you were in worrying over your husband's financial affairs. . ."

"Oh, yes, that too!" sighed Giselle.

"So, it was on the evening before the tragic accident that you made up your mind to act?"

"Yes, I told Anna she'd have to go."

"What made you pick that particular day?"

"I had come in and found Anna with her arms round my husband's neck, begging him to have her back and behaving generally like a common vamp. André hardly knew which way to look for embarrassment. She had gone so far, mark you, as to offer him money. She wanted to buy him back! That was what finally decided me to tell her to clear out. She left the room in a fury, saying 'I'll get your husband just when I want him!'"

"What a defiant attitude! A challenge!"

"Wasn't it?"

"So that put the lid on it, so to speak, as far as you were concerned?"

"Absolutely. The sooner the better, thought I. I made

her get an Air France reservation in the first plane out, the next day but one."

"Or, maybe, Mme. Pelissier, you made her drink a nice little dose of strychnine next day?"

"What?" exclaimed Giselle, startled.

The policeman was carefully preparing his climax for maximum impact. Fixing Giselle with his piercing black eyes, he told her in carefully measured words:

"You have just given me, Mme. Pelissier, an outline of the normal course of revenge ending in a criminal act."

"What d'you mean? I—make Anna drink strychnine?"

"Nothing could be easier since you have access to the Doctor's dispensary. . ."

White-faced and gripping the arms of her chair, Giselle faltered:

"You're not serious, are you? You—don't think—I'm capable of—killing Anna?"

"It is perfectly obvious that she didn't kill herself. The only alternative, therefore, is that she was murdered. And there are just two people in this house with motives for murdering her. Those two people are your husband and yourself: your husband for the sake of Mme. Vigneul's money; you out of jealousy."

"How ridiculous! The thought of doing away with my sister never for a moment entered my head. If I had wanted to kill her, I wouldn't have had the scene with her and told her to go. . ."

"You can't get away from the fact that you had a good motive for murder."

"No, no, no! I tell you. . . I swear to you, I'm innocent!"

"Then your husband did it. I am convinced it's one or the other of you. . . perhaps, even, both with the double motive."

With that the Superintendent stood up and said he now wished to speak to M. Pelissier.

"You'll find him in his office," said Giselle.  

## CHAPTER VI

*"The Coroner will decide."*

IT was cool in André's office. The blinds were drawn and the windows were also shaded by the enormous fan-like leaves of a cameropus tree growing just outside. An electric fan whirled from the ceiling.

The Superintendent's approach was more sympathetic and friendly than ever. This time he adopted an attitude of complete detachment appropriate to a newspaper reporter gathering facts. He started off by talking about public opinion: the blow to the prestige of the whites who were supposed to have brought civilisation to India; the indignity of being hauled up before an Indian judge and jury; the effects of Indian emancipation, &c., &c.

As he listened André grew more and more irritated. Beneath the polish of this cultured police superintendent he sensed the gloating triumphant revenge of the under dog who has come out on top. Growing tired of the man's interminable political allusions which had nothing whatever to do with the death of Mme. Vigneul, André finally had to bring the talk round to the object of the visit.

"Yes, yes, your sister-in-law's death was, indeed, a tragedy, M. Pelissier!" commented Majumdar vaguely.

André, unlike his wife, had his wits very much about him, and the first thing he noticed was the pointed use of the words "sister-in-law".

"A sad ending to a happy stay," remarked André with a sigh.

And the worst of it is the way the sensational press of the world is treating it," pursued Majumdar. "Only this morning at Calcutta the correspondent of the New York American, one of the Hearst Press papers, came to me chomping his cigar, looking for juicy details. 'A poisoning scandal in Bengal! Splendid stuff for the States! It's got everything—and the eternal triangle thrown in!'"

André's expression showed at once that he took exception to this insinuation.

"You must excuse me, M. Pelissier. I'm only quoting the American newspaper man. He actually called it 'the perfect triangle' consisting of 'photogenic husband, beautiful wife who is charming and chaste, and a rich widow high-tension vamp,' or something like that. He said the story was as good as Somerset Maugham in technique. 'Superintendent,' he said to me, 'this will make headlines in the States for days! D'you know what they're saying in Calcutta? That the wife discovered the husband in bed with the vamp-widow and poisoned her in the night!' . . . Of course I did my best to calm down these flights of imagination, but they serve to show you how urgent it is to clear the whole matter up."

"Yes, indeed, so it would appear from the way in which you keep alluding to murder and poisoning!"

"Do you believe it could have been suicide?"

"I don't know what to believe. There are so many

possibilities. Anna's death remains a tragic enigma to me."

"All the same, it seems to me, M. Pelissier, that suicide can be ruled out. None of the witnesses believe in the possibility of suicide and find no motive for Mme. Vigneul to have wanted to take her life. No, I'm afraid we're face to face with a murder committed under your roof at ten o'clock at night on the 29th of November. As you are interested in helping to solve this riddle, perhaps you will be kind enough to answer some questions I have to put to you."

"Certainly."

Superintendent Majumdar prided himself on his technique: the cunning of his interrogation, the traps set for the accused, the demoralising, unnerving effects that could be produced by manner and atmosphere, hints and veiled threats. Now, he stood up to offer André a cigarette and lit one for himself. He puffed at it contentedly for a moment with his eyes on a water colour of the Festival of Holi at Benares that hung on the opposite wall. Then, out of the blue, without the slightest warning, he suddenly asked in the friendly tone he had used from the start:

"Exactly how long were you Mme. Vigneul's lover?"

The unexpectedness of the question put André at a disadvantage. The Bengal police, he thought to himself, certainly didn't lose much time in finding things out. Aloud he said lamely:

"You know. . . then? ."

"My dear M. Pelissier, if we didn't know, we'd need to go back to school!"

"Oh, well, it's an eleven-year-old story, and it lasted three."



"And after you both married, you didn't see her any more, I suppose?"

"She lived in France; Giselle and I, here."

"All the witnesses so far heard are unanimous in the opinion that you and your wife are very happily married. This is a matter for congratulation, M. Pelissier."

"Oh, we're notorious in that respect."

"Quite! So that, between ourselves, you must have been extremely embarrassed when your sister-in-law tried to—er warn things up between you and—er."

"What?!"

"Listen M. Pelissier, it's not worth while playing hide and seek. We know a thing or two—far more than you imagine—about your private life!"

"Well—yes. I found Anna's 'attentions', shall we say, altogether too much of a good thing!"

"She went too far?"

"Well, she didn't seem to understand that I was happily married to Giselle, and that the past was over and done with."

"Was Mme. Vigneul the cause of any scenes of jealousy with your wife?"

"No, never. Giselle trusted me absolutely, and her trust was well placed."

"Bravo! You're a model husband!"

André found the Superintendent's compliments distasteful and irritating.

"So much for your domestic life, then, M. Pelissier. It's ideal, and you are blessed by the gods; but when we turn to your business affairs, the picture is not so rosy."

"The last cyclone ruined my crops and I am unable to repay monies lent me by a very rich man called . . ."

"Malouk."

"Of course, you've already spoken to him?"

"Like most disillusioned creditors, he's ready to go to any lengths to get his money back. That means you're going to be declared bankrupt."

"Precisely."

"And there's no way out for you?"

"No."

"I should say there was one, though, that seems quite feasible. You had a multi-millionaire sister-in-law who was fond of you. A loan of ten or twenty million francs would have been nothing to her. Even at a high rate of interest, it would have helped you."

"Sure, she offered it."

"Ah-ha! I thought so! In that case all your troubles were ended."

"No, they weren't. She made a condition."

"What condition?"

"That I divorced my wife."

"And, naturally, you refused?"

"Obviously I wasn't going to sacrifice Giselle for Anna's millions!"

All this time the Superintendent had been pacing the room, watched with increasing anxiety by André sitting at his desk. Suddenly Majumdar stopped short behind André's chair and announced slowly in a calm, soothing voice:

"You preferred an inheritance to a divorce. . . yes, I see."

"I beg your pardon. . . What was that you said?"

"What you couldn't accept on Anna's conditions while she lived became yours automatically when she died—through your wife, her next of kin and sole heir."

"I'm not quite sure that I understand what you're driving at, Superintendent. You can't mean. . .?"

"I certainly do! You're too intelligent not to see what I mean. What could be more natural—and tempting—for a man on the brink of bankruptcy than to seize the chance of acquiring a fortune overnight? Having first got the owner of the fortune out of the way. . ."

"In other words, Superintendent, you're suggesting I poisoned Anna's drink? You must be out of your mind, that's all!"

"I'm not making a formal accusation, only letting you know what I suspect."

"Thanks. I think your little joke has gone a bit too far. I dislike being regarded as a murderer!"

"Oh, I'm not fixing the guilt on anyone. That's not my job."

"Your argument simply doesn't stand up, Superintendent. You haven't got your facts right. How do you suppose I could have poisoned my sister-in-law when she herself handed round the glasses of lemon squash and chose her own? I never went near the table she put her glass down on. Go and ask the Ruffes whether what I'm saying is true or not. They were there all the time."

"Oh! . . . you know very well that at a party there's a lot of talk and laughter, and people cannot possibly remember every little movement you made. Nothing would be easier than to slip a little white powder—like sugar—into someone's glass without being observed."

"You'll never be able to prove that I put poison in Anna's glass: first, because it's palpably false; secondly, for the very simple reason that I hadn't any poison. The only drugs you'll find here are aspirin and quinine."

"So you deny that you poisoned your sister-in-law?"

"Not only do I deny it; I find your flippant suggestions most offensive!"

"There's no flippancy at all. You had a very good motive for getting rid of Mme. Vigneul."

"Superintendent, there are people who do not kill, even for millions."

"M. Pelissier, I have noted your denial. We now have to await the coroner's summing up. You will please remain at his disposal. He will decide whether you are to be arrested or not."

## CHAPTER VII

### *'The Poison Thief Revealed'*

NO sooner had the Superintendent Majumdar left the Pelissiers' bungalow than he learnt from Inspector Ram Singh who had been waiting outside, that one of Dr. Ruffec's Indian medical orderlies had come along with a message to say that the sister at the clinic wanted to see the Superintendent at once.

Majumdar went. It was the end of the morning surgery. Mrs. Sarodjini Sarkar, the sister-in-charge, took him into a small bare room to unburden herself.

"I believe the Doctor has told you there is no doubt where the poison came from, Superintendent? I saw with my own eyes that the sulphate of strychnine bottle had been interfered with. On the day of the tragedy a third of its contents had been taken. The doctor, no doubt, told you that his wife and Mme. Pelissier come here practically every day as voluntary workers; but there was also Mme. Vigneul. She came, too."

"Oh, did she help at the clinic then?"

"No. She first came with her sister two days after her arrival in Chandernagor. The doctor showed her round. After that she wasn't seen here again for nearly a

month—until the 29th of November, at about eleven o'clock in the morning. I was busy at that time bandaging a patient when I saw Mme. Vigneul. She said 'Good morning' at a distance and went on, I supposed, to see Dr. Ruffec. His consulting room is right at the end of the corridor, and on the right next to it is the dispensary. After a minute or two I happened to look down the corridor and saw Mme. Vigneul come out of the dispensary, not the doctor's room. At the time I thought nothing of it, but in view of what has transpired since, I wondered whether Mme. Vigneul had helped herself to the strychnine."

"The bottle, you say, was full overnight?"

"I'm absolutely certain it was. We hardly ever use this drug. Besides, that same evening Dr. Ruffec noticed that the bottle was only two-thirds full. So the theft must have occurred some time that day."

"You think, then, that Mme. Vigneul helped herself to the drug and took it away with her?"

"To my mind there's no doubt about that whatever. There's no other explanation for the missing strychnine."

The Superintendent was thoughtful for a moment as if cogitating the next step, then he said:

"Sister, what you have just revealed is of the utmost importance, and I must take immediate action in consequence. Will you please tell Dr. Ruffec and his wife that I want them to be at the Pelissiers' at six o'clock this evening?"

"What for, Superintendent?"

"A reconstruction of the scene of the . . . incident."

Out in the street again the Superintendent called to Inspector Ram Singh.

"Go to the American Mission," he told him, "and tell Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson to come to the Pelissiers' at six this evening. I'm staging a reconstruction of the crime. And, of course, don't forget to tell the Pelissiers."

As soon as Superintendent Majumdar had left them André and Giselle shut themselves in their room and held an anxious conference. The policeman's menacing words were echoing in their ears. "One of you is guilty. . . perhaps both!" was the phrase that kept going round in Giselle's head. To André, as he nervously paced the room with furrowed brow and hands clasped behind him, there recurred again and again the words: "You had a good motive for wanting to get rid of Mme. Vigneul!"

The more he thought about it, the more he saw the police point of view. His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a cry of anguish from his wife:

"André! André! Do you know that policeman suspects me of poisoning Anna!"

"And me too."

"It's frightful. . . He thinks I acted out of jealousy!"

"And he thinks I did it to get her money!"

After a pause Giselle started up pale and tense, as if under the influence of an electric shock.

"André! André! Tell me," she cried, "You didn't do it, did you?"

"What on earth's the matter with you, Giselle? Are you going out of your mind?"

"Malouk's threats didn't . . . drive you to. . .?"

"What do you think? Am I a murderer?"

Giselle jumped up from her chair, her face set and white. She stopped her husband abruptly in his pacing

of the room, flung both her arms tightly round his waist and forced him to look at her in the eyes.

"Look at me, André! Look at me. . . Did you? Are you guilty?"

André shrugged his shoulders with impatience.

"I'm no more guilty than you!" he snapped.

"But—if you're innocent, then you'll think I did it."

"And if you had done it out of jealousy, that would be a better reason than the one they've thought up for me. But all this talk is nothing but police suspicion and hypothetical assumptions. They're all worthless without proof. Have you been seen alone in the doctor's dispensary? Alone, without any witness on your side? ."

"Ah, so you're beginning to suspect me too, now!"

"No I'm not, silly, but I want to see if they've got anything to go on."

"Of course I've often been there alone, but I've never taken anything. Anything, like quinine, I've had out of the dispensary was given to me. Sarodjini handed me the last lot of quinine. . ."

There was a silence during which André had started pacing the room again; then he asked in a low voice:

"Even if you had touched the strychnine, how could they prove it?"

"There you are! You see, you're not at all convinced of my innocence!"

"Yes, I am."

"I can tell you're not. . . Anyway the *khitmatgar* made the iced lemon squashes and Lakshmi brought them into the room."

"So you had nothing to do with them? Then why don't they suspect the *khitmatgar* and Lakshmi? They both had a hand in preparing the drink"



"Because they have no poison. Where would they get it? They never go near the clinic."

"In that case, if the servants are to be left out of it, there are only two likely suspects: you and I."

"I'm not the guilty one, and I'm sure you're not either, André."

"Yes, but Majumdar doesn't believe in our innocence."

"Just as you're not altogether sure of mine! Oh, André! This is Anna's revenge! Even though she's dead she's trying to part us! Still coming between us! . . ."

"Giselle, for goodness sake try to control your imagination! Truth will out, you know that. . . It's only a matter of time and patience."

The conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. Lakshmi appeared announcing the arrival of Inspector Ram Singh to see Giselle. It was to tell her the Superintendent wanted a reconstruction that same evening of the scene on the night of the party.

Announcing the news to her husband, Giselle admitted:

"Honestly, darling, I don't know whether its something to be nervous or glad about!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Eleventh Hour Witness*

THE first arrival for the reconstruction that evening were the MacPhersons. The missionary had a good opinion of Superintendent Majumdar. He considered the Bengali police officer most courteous, restrained and intelligent.

When the Ruffecs turned up, Linette at once put her arms about Giselle to comfort her, and both of them were near to tears. Dr. Ruffec came to the rescue with a cheerful observation that broke the sombre tension in the room.

"Personally, I think it's a very good idea to bring us all together like this. It's the best possible way of getting at the real cause of poor Anna's death."

Before any more could be said, Lakshmi announced the arrival of the Superintendent, who got down to business at once.

"I have brought you all here to the scene of the tragedy," he explained, "because it seems to be the only way of getting to the bottom of this mystery. According to the latest evidence that has come to me, Mme. Vigneul herself took the sulphate of strychnine from Dr. Ruffec's dispensary."

Consternation and amazement were read on every face.

"Now," continued Majumdar, "I'm going to ask you all to be so good as to take up the positions you occupied in this room on the night of the surprise party. Dr. Ruffec, what were you doing?"

"My wife and I, with Mme. Vigneul, had brought some bottles of champagne and food. Linette and Mme. Pelissier untied the parcels."

"We were standing here, at this table against the wall," broke in Linette. "Giselle and I were having a chat by ourselves as we took the things out of the bags and packets. Then Giselle went to her room to try to pull herself together with a nip of brandy."

"Why? What was the matter with her?"

"She was affected by the reappearance of her sister in so very unexpected a manner. Just then Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson arrived."

The Superintendent turned to them.

"Where were you both sitting?"

"Right here," said the Missionary, "in these same wicker armchairs just inside the porch."

"Very well, stay there. What happened next?"

"Anna, André and Mr. MacPherson listened to my husband telling stories about the jungle," continued Linette.

"And then I came back into the room," said Giselle, "and Anna proposed a toast in honour of my happy marriage to André. Meanwhile, Lakshmi had come in carrying a tray of glasses filled with iced lemon squash."

"Please call your maid," requested the policeman.

When the girl came in she looked from face to face puzzled and Dr. Ruffec took it upon himself to explain what was going on.

"Was it you, Lakshmi, who made the lemon squashes?" asked Majumdar.

"No, sahib. The *khitmatgar* made them. I look at him do it only. He squeeze two lemons with much sugar in each glass, and put also ice. Every glass the same."

"Was it sugar, or something else?"

"Yes it was sugar. I taste it on my finger, and—I no die!."

"Very well. Now Lakshmi I want you to go and get the same tray and glasses, *without* lemon squash this time. You are going to show us what you did on the night of the party."

"Can do at once, sahib."

While Lakshmi was out of the room, the Superintendent turned to Dr. Ruffec and asked:

"Mme. Vigneti was quite good spirits until she drank the lemon squash, wasn't she?"

"She was in high spirits. The party was hers. She came along to our bungalow to rope us in to help. She spontaneously proposed the toast to Giselle and André, as if there had been no quarrel, never a harsh word between them."

"That is the most puzzling part of the whole thing, doctor. According to the known facts, here was a woman who at eleven o'clock in the morning went to your dispensary to get strychnine on the quiet. Then, the same evening she's full of goodwill and gaiety, organises a little farewell party and dies four hours later of the poison she has herself stolen. There's a hitch in it somewhere!"

At that moment Lakshmi reappeared carrying a tray of empty glasses. Majumdar went up to her and asked

where she had put the tray on the night of the party.

"On this table between these two armchairs, sahib."

"And then you went out of the room?"

"No, I stay."

"Where, exactly?"

"Near the door over there in case perhaps memsahib she needed me."

"What happened next, doctor? Mme. Vigneul proposed a toast, and then? . . ."

"First of all she handed round the drinks. . ."

The methodical Superintendent made the doctor's wife act the part of Mme. Vigneul to the best of her knowledge and remembrance.

Going through the motions, Linette said:

"Two glasses to Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson, one to André, one to me—I was sitting over there. . ."

"Don't forget mine," interposed Giselle. "She put it on the arm of the chair I was sitting in, but I wasn't in it at that moment. I had gone over to talk to Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson."

"And what about Mme. Vigneul's glass, where was that?"

"On the arm of the other chair, next to mine," said Giselle.

"Right. Everyone had a glass, and then everyone drank, I suppose?"

"No, we didn't," said the doctor, "because Anna suddenly noticed a red glow in the sky over the left bank of the Hoogli. (It was the fire in the timber yard that night). We all moved over to the windows to get a good view of the tremendous red glow in the sky."

The Superintendent made them all do as they had done on the night of the party. Giselle was just a little behind the rest.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "The way you are all placed, with Mme. Pelissier some paces behind everybody else, shows that while Mme. Vigneul was looking out of the window at the fire, Mme. Pelissier could easily slip something into her sister's glass without anyone noticing."

This announcement made all the actors face round to their stage manager with a chorus of "Oh's."

Linette was about to protest first, when Lakshmi left her post by the door that opened on to the passage, and trotted up to the Superintendent. Giving him a formal bow with hands clasped on bosom, she surprised everyone by saying in her little girl voice:

"Excuse me, sahib superintendent, but what you say no is possible. . . My memsahib no could do. Poison already in glass!"

A murmur broke out, and the policeman rounded sharply on Lakshmi.

"What's this story you're trying to tell me now?"

"No story, sahib. I see it with my two eyes!"

"You saw what?"

"You permit, sahib superintendent, I do same things as before Madame Anna die."

"Show me exactly what you did."

"Me here bring glasses and put on table—so. Then, before they drink, all go look out window at big fire in sky. Mme. Vigneul look too, but turn round very quick while no one see her. No one but Lakshmi! I see her

open little gold box she take from handbag. From box she pour white powder in glass she already put down for my memsahib. This was the glass on arm of this chair. She do it quick—quick! Then she turn to look again at five out of window. I watch much surprised and say to myself: 'What she do perhaps no is good for my meinsahib.' I think this because I know Madame Vigneul is bad, wicked woman and she no like my memsahib. She want, I think, give bad belly pain to my memsahib. So, quick, while all look out of window, I do lie this—so!

Lakshmi demonstrated a swift change-over of the tumblers placed on the arms of the two chairs which had been occupied by Giselle and Anna. Then she resumed her story.

"... And when Mme. Vigneul come back to armchair, she take glass she think is hers, but it no is. It is glass she put white powder in for my memsahib. She drink and she die punished by the good God for her wickedness. Amen."

Dr. Ruffec was the first to speak when the audience recovered their wits.

"Well, there's an epilogue no one would have thought of!" he said rather lamely.

"You're right!" agreed the police officer. "Lakshmi's evidence leaves no doubt as to the intentions of the deceased, and links up with what the dispenser, Sarodjini Sarkar, said about seeing her go into the dispensary that morning."

"I would never have thought Anna capable of that!" sobbed Giselle, now completely collapsed in her chair and in the grip of an emotional reaction from the strain she had been undergoing.

"Well, that settles everything," declared Majumdar with an air of evident satisfaction. "It only remains for Lakshmi to call at the police station to-morrow to make her deposition and sign it. In my opinion she has meted out a richly deserved punishment to a cold-blooded criminal. I apologise M. and Mme. Pelissier for having put you through such unpleasant interrogations, and for having suspected you. Providential justice has been done."

"There's no ill-feeling, Superintendent," said Andre holding out his hand. "Pure chance, fortunately for us, has made hay of all your well-trained logical deductions."

Lakshmi had resumed her post by the door and stood with her customary impassive immobility which gave her a striking resemblance to the pagoda statue of the goddess after whom she was named.

Suddenly Giselle darted across the room and took the girl in her arms.

"Darling little Lakshmi, you saved my life! You saved my life!" she cried with tears running down her cheeks.

"Like you do to me, memsahib. . . without you I die of typhus. So I very pleased to do same for you, yes? . . . Memsahib, you remember the man with snakes who come when you make the big party for Mme. Vigneul?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Ananda, snake-charmer, he see well the future. . . He say that night: '*Death will come to this house before the next moon*'. Often I think of his words when I look at night at pond in garden and see lotus flowers go to sleep. . . when the stars come in sky. Never do I trust



Mme. Vigneul. I glad I find trick that make her kill herself with colic and no you, meinsahib!"

Giselle found no words, so she kissed again the ingenuous child, who had saved her life.